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WIFE OR WIDOW?

BY RETT WINWOOD.



"I WAS SO MISERABLE—SO UNHAPPY! I MEANT TO SAY FAREWELL, AND THEN SEE HIM NO MORE."

Wife or Widow?

OR,

ETHELIND ERLE'S ENEMY.

BY RETT WINWOOD,

AUTHOR OF "A GIRL'S HEART," "A DANGEROUS WOMAN," "THE WRONGED HEIRESS," ETC.

CHAPTER I

THE FIRST BRIDAL EVE.

A MYSTICAL stir was in the house. Beautiful exotics decorated hall and corridor, and flanked the grand central staircase with bud, blossom and arches of living green. The air seemed heavy with the perfume of violets and heliotrope, and at the far end of the spacious drawing-room hung the traditional marriage-bell, pure, perfect and stainless as though fairy fingers had fashioned and suspended it.

It was Ethelind Erle's wedding-eve. Glen-oaks, the lovely country-seat of her guardian, Colonel Philip Falkner, had been profusely decorated for the occasion. Most of the guests were already in the house, making the scene brilliant with their rich toilettes and glittering jewels.

The windows stood wide open, their hangings of delicate lace swaying gently in the soft May breeze that crept up from the placid bosom of the bay. The moon stood trembling on the eastern horizon, as if eager yet half-afraid to pour its pearl-white flood over the slumbering hills and valleys and the waiting tide that washed the amber sand below. Fair as a dream of Eden was the scene.

Before a cheval-glass in one of the upper chambers stood Dolores Gloyne. She was to be bride-maid, and wore the traditional white; but her olive complexion and usually ruddy cheeks looked quite ghastly in the brilliant light that pervaded the room. In her shaking fingers she held a scented note.

"Come to me in the conservatory, Dolores," it said. "You can steal away easily enough in the crowd. I must see you alone, and this may be our only opportunity."

VINCENT.

The young girl crushed the note impatiently in her hand.

"I must go," she murmured. "Vincent might do something reckless if I refused to see him. But it is very wrong to meet him clandestinely after the promise grandpapa extorted from me."

Catching up a shawl that lay on one of the chairs, she flung it over her shoulders and stepped to the door. There was noise and bustle enough in the lower rooms, but the corridor seemed deserted; and with a quick-drawn breath she flitted down the broad passage.

Near the landing was a small alcove curtained with crimson damask. Just as Dolores passed this recess, an arm was suddenly thrust out from the drapery, and she felt herself drawn forcibly forward.

"Is it you, darling?" breathed a low, musical voice.

Dolores drew back with a startled exclamation.

"Raymond—you here!" she uttered, glancing into the dark, handsome face so close to her own.

"You frightened me dreadfully."

The hand fell from her arm.

"I beg your pardon, dear cousin," said the young man, in a cold, changed voice. "These halls are so confoundedly dark that I mistook you for Ethelind. Why do you come stealing upon one muffled up like that?"

"I have an errand down-stairs, and my white dress seemed so conspicuous."

"Where did you leave Miss Erle?"

"She is still in her chamber, I suppose. Have you any message for her?"

"Thank you—none. I can wait. Another hour and she will be my wife. Then I shall have no use for go-betweens."

There was so much exultation in his voice that Dolores again lifted her eyes quickly. The face into which she gazed was magnificent in its beauty, and most women found it irresistibly attractive. But a shiver of repulsion ran over the girl. Raymond Challoner was her cousin—almost her only living relative; nevertheless, she did not altogether trust him.

"I hope you will make Ethelind a good husband, Raymond," she said, earnestly.

"Am I not an idolatrous lover?"

Dolores sighed.

"These fierce, headstrong passions are not the ones that endure longest, or that will suffer most."

"I would die, if necessary, for my beautiful bride. Is not that enough?"

A half-mocking smile curled his lips, and he turned impatiently away. Dolores once more gathered up her shawl, and ran swiftly on to the back staircase. If she wished to see Vincent Erle and return before the hour appointed for the ceremony, there was no time to lose.

The shortest route to the conservatory lay through the large dining-hall, where the wedding supper with its flowers, cut-glass and costly plate was already laid out. The three or four busy attendants scarcely noticed the muffled figure that glided, ghost-like, down the long avenue between the groaning tables, and disappeared in the cool green shadows beyond. Not a single eye followed the girl with curiosity or suspicion.

Dolores paused just within the conservatory, and was straining her eyes through the perfumed obscurity of the place when a rustling sound fell upon her ears, and a man emerged from behind a trellis of the luxuriant bignonia.

"How long you were in coming, Dolores!" he exclaimed, catching her in his arms.

She laid her cheek against his shoulder, and answered with a repressed sob:

"Oh, Vincent! It was wrong for me to come at all!"

"Wrong?"

"I promised grandpapa, before leaving home, that I would avoid you. Now you have tempted me to break my word."

"It was cruel of him to extort such a promise!" said the young man indignantly.

"I know he has my best interests at heart. Poor grandpapa! It seems base and ungrateful to deceive him, when he has done so much for me."

A shade of disdain crossed Vincent Erle's handsome blonde face.

"You take too grave a view of the offense, Dolores," he said. "Egbert Challoner has no right to interdict these meetings."

"Remember, he has been like a father to me."

"That is no reason why you should submit to him like a slave. He knows that we love each other devotedly, and yet he has forbidden me the house, and commanded you not to see me. And why? Simply because I am poor, and therefore not an eligible suitor for your hand. It is shameful!"

"Hush!" whispered Dolores, in a shivering voice. "Try to bear with him for my sake."

"I have borne too long already."

"Don't speak like that. It pains me to hear you. But it is not prudent to linger here. Tell me why you sent for me, Vincent, that I may return to my own room."

"I believe you are anxious to be rid of me!" was the half-sullen exclamation.

"Oh, no, no. But you know as well as I do the risk we run in coming here."

There was a moment's silence, and the young man drew her still more close to his side.

"There must be an end of this," he said, in a low voice that was scarcely audible. "We seem no nearer the consummation of our happiness than we were twelve months ago. I have made up my mind. When this wedding is once over, I shall go to old Mr. Challoner, and make a clean breast of everything."

Dolores threw up her hands, a look of real terror on her face.

"Oh, Vincent! my heart misgives me. Promise me that you will do nothing rash. My grandpapa might curse me in his anger, and that I could not bear. Wait—be patient a little longer."

Her breath caught itself in hysterical sobs, and she would have hid her face on his shoulder had he not suddenly pushed her from him.

"Compose yourself," he whispered. "I am certain I heard footsteps."

Dolores clung faint and trembling to the trellis. After a moment of intense suspense, her worst fears were realized. Forth from the thick shadows thrown by two large stands of blossoming plants, stepped the bent figure of a haughty old man.

"Grandpapa!" she gasped.

Mr. Egbert Challoner, for it was he, confronted her, his face crimson with rage.

"You vixen!" he hissed. "How dared you disobey me! How dared you meet this fellow in opposition to my wishes?"

She sprang forward and clung to his arm, her tears falling fast.

"Do not be angry with me, dear grandpapa!" she pleaded. "I was so miserable—so unhappy!"

How could I keep my word with Vincent and my own heart tempting me to break it? I meant to say farewell, and then see him no more."

Rudely repulsing her, Mr. Challoner turned to Vincent Erle.

"What excuse have you to offer for your dishonorable conduct?" he haughtily demanded.

"None," was the cold response. "I have done nothing that I should not do over again, under like provocation. Let your displeasure be visited upon me alone—that is all I ask. It was I who tempted Dolores to deceive you."

Mr. Challoner gazed steadfastly at the young man, without speaking, for several seconds. Then, contemptuously turning his back on him, he grasped the hand of his granddaughter, led her back into the dining-hall, and carefully closed the door.

"I am surprised that you should betray the trust I reposed in you, Dolores," he said, sternly. "To avoid remark, I consented that you should come to Glenoaks and assist at the wedding of your cousin Raymond. Knowing, as you do, in what disfavor I hold Vincent Erle it is strange that you should take a base advantage of the situation."

"I know it was very wrong—oh, forgive me."

"You do not deserve to be pardoned."

"I know it. But—but—my heart is broken."

Her head drooped, and she again broke into irrepressible sobs. Mr. Challoner stood looking at her in sorrowful silence. At length she grew more composed, and leaning a little toward him, said in an eager whisper:

"I wish you would tell me why you are so bitterly opposed to Vincent. You never assigned any good and sufficient reason for the dislike you profess to feel."

"He is not a suitable match for you."

"Because of his poverty?"

"That is one of the reasons."

"You did not oppose Raymond's marriage with Vincent's sister, Ethelind."

"True."

The girl's lip took a scornful curve.

"I think I understand the real nature of the distinction you would make," she said, almost bitterly. "Ethelind was fortunate enough to fall heir to her mother's fortune, while poor Vincent has nothing. It is merely a question of bonds, bank stock and dividends."

"Nay, child, you are mistaken. Ethelind is a noble young woman—even the proudest family might feel honored to welcome her to its circle. Vincent, unfortunately, does not resemble her in character or disposition."

The girl's face suddenly became white and drawn as if with pain.

"What do you mean?" she gasped.

"Simply this, that I have no confidence in the man, or in his professions. Let that suffice. We will speak of him no more. You must give him up. I shall not brook a second act of disobedience."

Turning as he spoke, he left her without another word. Dolores stood for some moments like one stunned. She turned giddily from the sight of glittering plate and snowy damask of the wedding banquet as if it had sickened her. At length she groped her way up the deserted staircase, murmuring with livid lips:

"Ah! how little does my grandfather guess of the shameful truth! And, God help me! how can I ever tell him? I am too miserable to live! Dear, dear Vincent! I cannot think evil of you—I will not! It would kill me. May God keep you true to me—true to yourself!"

CHAPTER II

THE UNWILLING SUPPLIANT.

DOLORES had scarcely regained the shelter of her own room, and thrown aside her heavy shawl, when slow, dragging steps descended the corridor. Looking up expectantly as the door swung open, she saw the bride-elect, Ethelind Erie, totter across the threshold.

"Oh, my poor friend! What brings you here?"

Dolores started impulsively forward as she asked the question. Whiter than her bridal-robe, Ethelind stood before her, her fair oval face twitched with pain, and her eyes, so like violets in calmer moods, looking straight forward in a dreary stare absolutely appalling.

"Hide me!" the poor creature cried at length, imploringly. "Dolores, you are my only friend. Lock and double-lock the door. I want no one but you."

Dolores shoved the bolt into its socket; then, returning, she gently took Ethelind's hand and drew her to a seat.

"What has happened?" she said, compassionately. "Tell me all about it!"

"I want to get away—away from him!" cried Ethelind, wildly. "I—I—hate him. 'Tis of no use struggling against the feeling. It grows more and more intense. I believe I am mad tonight. My head is burning. Oh, Dolores, pity me!"

"I do pity you," was the gentle answer. "Is this marriage so extremely distasteful to you?"

"I would rather die than become Raymond Challoner's wife."

Dolores sighed, and a heavy weight settled upon her heart. She had long suspected that Raymond did not possess all the love of the bride he had chosen, but this active, intense repugnance shocked and surprised her.

"Oh, why did you not speak of this before it was too late?" she exclaimed.

Ethelind dropped her eyes and shuddered.

"I feel like one just waking from a dream. I never fully realized what I had done until tonight when I roused up to find myself arrayed in these hateful robes. Oh, if they were only my shroud it would not matter!"

"It is wicked to say such things, Ethelind."

"Is it? I do not know. In the grave there is peace and rest. Oh, if I were only there!"

She started to her feet, and began to march restlessly up and down the room, her hand clasped tightly on her bosom. Like the ghost of a bride she looked with her ghastly face—in which the only spots of color were the violet-blue of her eyes—and her trailing satin robe over which fell, uncared for, the fleecy folds of the bridal-vail.

At length she paused before a Japanese cabinet that stood in one corner of the room. She remained there motionless so long that Dolores, softly following her, saw that her eyes were fixed upon a small dagger of foreign workmanship that reposed on one of the shelves.

"Better death than a life of misery," muttered the half-crazed creature. "God is merciful—he knows my temptation and despair—he will forgive me."

With a frenzied laugh she seized the dagger, and in another moment would have buried it in her bosom had not Dolores arrested the uplifted arm.

"My God, Ethelind, what would you do?"

"Let me alone! Why did you seek to hinder me?"

"My poor friend, do you not know that self-destruction is the one sin that Heaven itself cannot pardon?"

A distressing wail broke from Ethelind's lips, her limbs trembled, and she sank down on the floor as if strength had suddenly deserted her.

"I told you I was mad."

"I believe, on my soul, you are. Come, let me remove your wreath and vail and you shall lie down on my bed until you are more composed."

Ethelind fiercely pushed away the hands that would have performed these friendly offices.

"Let my vail remain. It is altogether fitting that Raymond should have a mad-woman for his bride."

"There shall be no marriage! If no other voice is lifted against such a wicked proceeding mine shall be. Oh, Ethelind, why did you cloak your real feelings until this late hour?"

"It was a part of my madness," she added, while a shudder passed through her. "I have acted like an insane person all these weeks. It was pique that caused me to accept Raymond Challoner. I plighted my troth to him while my whole heart belonged to another."

There was a silence. Dolores felt herself turn paler, but she leaned over the stricken creature, gently clasping her arms about her.

"Let me go to Colonel Falkner, your guardian, and tell him all this."

A sudden scarlet flamed over that pallid face, creeping up to the roots of her glinting auburn hair. She quickly arrested it, and said at length in a scarcely-audible voice:

"Do you think Colonel Falkner would help me?"

"I do."

"Where is he?"

"Down-stairs, among the guests, I suppose."

"Very well. You may find him, and bring him here."

Dolores poured a glass of water, and when Ethelind had swallowed it she led her to an easy-chair beside the open window. The curtains were looped back and the moonlight streamed into the room. The faint perfume of violet and nymphetamine was on the air.

"Take courage. All may yet be well."

Having uttered these comforting words, she went out hastily. Her own troubles had no

place in her consciousness at that moment. She descended the grand staircase without giving a second thought to the curious eyes that were upon her, though a very audible whisper reached her ears ere she gained the lower hall.

"That is Miss Gloyne. She is to be bride-maid. Isn't her dress becoming?"

One of the servants stood near the drawing-room door, and to him she spoke in suppressed tones.

"I must see Colonel Falkner. Please find him, and ask him to come here."

The servant bowed, and hurried away. Three minutes later, a tall, powerfully-built man of two-and-thirty had taken her hand and was bending over it. He was distinguished-looking rather than handsome. His eyes were large, and of a deep gray, his hair black. It was a face that never failed to attract.

"John says you were asking for me, Dolores," he said.

"Yes, Colonel Falkner—Ethelind is in my room. She is in trouble. You had better go to her."

He looked at her with a glance of surprise.

"There has been no blundering in the arrangements, I trust?"

"It isn't that. Will you go?"

"It lacks but ten minutes of the hour appointed for the ceremony," he said, referring to his watch. "Yes, come quickly; we have no time to lose."

They passed together up the stairs, under the arches of living green with which they were decorated. At the door of her own room Dolores paused, and signed for Colonel Falkner to enter alone.

"I will wait here," she said.

He went in and closed the door. A sudden thrill went to his heart as his gaze rested upon that drooping, listless figure at the window. He drew nearer.

"Ethelind, I am here. What can I do for you?"

At the sound of his voice she half-rose, with clenched hands, but instantly fell back again.

"If you do not save me," she said, in a sharp, unsteady whisper, "I am lost."

"Save you! From what?"

"A broken heart—a blighted life."

Colonel Falkner looked at her curiously. She was shivering, and her face shone deadly pale in the lamplight; but her blue eyes burned and glittered feverishly bright.

"Has Raymond done anything to offend you?" he asked, after a brief pause.

"Raymond! Don't speak his name!" she cried, vehemently. "I hate him. I dread his presence—I shrink from his touch—oh, would that I could hide away from him forever!"

"Poor child! How long has this been so?"

A hysterical laugh broke from her lips.

"How long? It has never been otherwise. He was always distasteful to me—always."

"Why, then, did you betroth yourself to him?"

His tone of gentle reproof seemed to sting her beyond all her powers of self-control. Leaning toward him, she said quite fiercely:

"And you ask that—you who might have saved me, by a kind word or a loving look, from this living death? Great God!"

"Ethelind!"

"Let me speak. It is better so. The shame of the confession may kill me. But for your indifference I might never have given myself to another. I hoped to forget you—in time. Oh, vain delusion! And I hoped that you, too, would feel a little prick of pain when we were parted forever. Good heavens! That was a madder thought than the other! You do not care how deeply I suffer."

Colonel Falkner himself turned very pale as he listened to her ravings. In vain he tried to check them. The confession was as humiliating to him as it could be to herself; and he realized the overpowering shame that must be hers when she came to her better senses.

"Try to calm yourself," he said, earnestly. "Just now you are excited and delirious, and know not what you are saying."

"Bear with me a little longer," she went on, in low-toned entreaty. "I scarcely know when this passion took root in my heart—it seems as though it had always been there. At first it was only a child's worship of an ideal hero. But, during the six months that have elapsed since you returned from that long, long sojourn in Europe, it has developed into the love of a passionate woman."

Colonel Falkner gave a shrinking gesture, as if the words only pained and distressed him. After a silence he gained resolution to say:

"You are my ward, Ethelind—many years my junior. I invariably think of you as a child."

"Suffering develops one early."

He turned partially away.

"This is a profitless subject, my poor child. Let us dismiss it now and forever."

She rose suddenly, stood before him, and lifted her cold, white face.

"I have sometimes suspected that a prior passion had closed your heart against me," she said, in a whisper. "Tell me, is it so?"

"Men seldom reach my age unscathed."

Speaking thus, he drew from his breast-pocket a small locket studded with jewels, opened it and held it toward her.

Ethelind bent to look. The dark, passionate, bewildering face that smiled on her from the painted ivory seemed just such another as that for which Marc Antony flung a world away.

"You loved the original of that picture?" she said, very low.

"Yes."

"Perhaps you love her still."

"I do."

She gasped a little.

"Did you meet her abroad?"

"Yes."

Another pause. For her life she could not go on with the interrogatory. She stood like a marble woman, the pitiless lamplight shining on her livid face.

"I hope you were happy in your love," at last she contrived to say, with a smile that was only pitiful.

"No, for it wrecked and cursed my life."

She tried to look at him, but her eyelids drooped with a slight quivering that betrayed how deeply her nature was wrought upon. Suddenly her fragile figure began to sway violently, and she put out both hands like a person groping in the dark.

"I am faint—I am ill!" she gasped.

He sprang forward and caught her in his arms just as, with a long moan, she would have fallen senseless on the floor.

CHAPTER III.

A TORTURED HEART.

COLONEL FALKNER had been an officer in the late war, winning his title in wild scenes of carnage and bloodshed; but it had never before fallen to his lot to see a woman in a deadly swoon, and he found himself helpless as a child.

A pang of self-reproach thrilled him as he gazed upon her deathly-white face resting so unconsciously upon his breast.

"May heaven forgive me if I have been in fault for this," he muttered.

Raising his voice he called sharply to Dolores, who had remained on guard outside the door. She entered, looking nervous and flurried.

"Mercy on me!" she ejaculated, taking in the situation at a glance. "The hour has struck—they are looking for Ethelind—and now she has fainted on our hands!"

With ready presence of mind she removed the bridal-wreath and vail, viciously tossing them into the darkest corner of the room; then wheeled a low couch up to the open window.

"Let her lie here, where the cool air will blow over her. That will do. Now lock the door, or we shall be invaded by every maid in the house."

The caution did not come a moment too soon. Colonel Falkner had scarcely turned the key when an impatient knock sounded on the door, and a treble voice outside demanded news of the bride, who was missing from her chamber.

"Ethelind is here, with me," Dolores called out. "Go away. We will join you presently."

"The hour has struck, and Mr. Challoner is waiting at the foot of the stairs."

"Tell him to be patient."

She looked dismayed, however, as she bent over the senseless bride with smelling salts and *eau de cologne*.

"This is no ordinary fainting-fit," she whispered. "I feel half afraid."

"What is to be done?"

"Let us wait and see."

Dolores recalled every remedy she had ever known to be employed in such cases, but all in vain. Not a single symptom of returning animation came back to those rigid limbs and marble-like features.

"A physician must be summoned," Colonel Falkner said at length, in a nervous tone. "She might die!"

"Yes, we are doing her no good. You can slip out quietly. I will undertake to keep the room clear until Dr. Lance arrives."

At this moment an imperative knock sounded on the door.

WIFE OR WIDOW?

"Open," said a haughty voice. "I must and will know the reason of this delay."

"It is my mother," whispered Colonel Falkner. "She must be admitted, of course."

He undid the fastenings, and Mrs. Falkner entered, looking very stately and grand in her black velvet dress, with the Falkner diamonds sparkling on her arms and at her throat. A remarkably handsome woman in spite of her sixty-odd years was the mistress of Glenoaks, and many a youthful belle might have coveted the purity of her complexion, the cold brilliancy of her steel-gray eyes, and the graceful poise of her well-shaped head.

"Philip—you here!" she exclaimed, as her startled gaze rested on the figure of her son.

He pointed silently to the motionless figure on the couch. Mrs. Falkner sprung forward, effectually startled out of her self-control.

"Ethelind! Good heavens! What has happened to the poor child?"

"It is a fainting-fit."

"Of course. But, what could have caused it? Dear me. Was ever anything so unfortunate? I'm afraid the wedding will have to be put off, and all our friends sent home again."

Colonel Falkner went out hastily to dispatch one of the servants for the family physician. Long before Dr. Lance arrived, however, in spite of every precaution taken, it began to be whispered about in the lower rooms that the bride-elect had suddenly fallen ill, and there was likely to be no wedding.

One of the first persons to besiege the room in which Ethelind lay was Raymond Challoner himself. He looked pale, anxious and nervous.

"She will be better soon—will she not?" he said, in a half-imploring whisper, stealing to the side of Dolores.

"I hope so."

"Well enough for the ceremony to go on?"

"Certainly not," Dolores answered, sharply. "You must give her up for the present—thank God!"

He looked at her fiercely.

"Why do you conclude your sentence with a thanksgiving?" he demanded.

"Because Ethelind will have a respite she greatly requires. Do you not realize what has brought her to this pass? She does not love you, and the thought of the marriage is killing her."

"She will think better of it when all is over."

"You had better give her up."

"I am not so magnanimous," said Raymond, with a slight sneer. "She is necessary to my happiness, and I shall hold her to her plighted word. What else could you expect?"

"Nothing—from you," Dolores answered, bitterly. "A nobler man would have decided differently."

"I do not profess to be a saint. But I am not weak enough to be turned aside from my purpose by this unfortunate *contretemps*."

"It is strange that you should desire an unwilling bride."

"But you are not madly in love with one who simply regards you with toleration," he answered, ere he turned away.

An hour later there came a faint, tremulous motion about Ethelind's closed lips, and her eyes opened, sending one quick, startled glance all round.

"Philip, where are you?" she cried, wildly.

Colonel Falkner drew near and took her hand.

"Rouse yourself, Ethelind," he said, trying with ready tact to shield her. "You have been very ill."

"I remember now," she faintly panted. "I was dressed for the wedding—the guests were in the house—"

A frightened look came on her face, and the words died away in an unintelligible murmur. Just at that instant she caught a glimpse of Raymond Challoner himself, standing near in his elegant evening costume, looking at her searchingly. She shuddered violently, and closed her eyes.

"I am glad you are better, darling," he whispered, bending over her.

"Go away," she panted. "Go, and leave me with Dolores. I am too ill to talk."

Dr. Lance now interposed in her behalf, and in a few minutes the room was cleared of all whose presence there was superfluous.

All that night and most of the next day Ethelind lay on the couch, white, silent, and helpless. Her only interest in life seemed a desire to be let alone. Her hands remained, for the most part, folded on her bosom, and her eyes looked straight forward in a fixed, dreamy stare.

Late in the afternoon, Mrs. Falkner came upstairs for the first time since the previous night.

"Do try to rouse yourself, child," she said,

drawing near the couch. "Poor Raymond suffers dreadfully. He does nothing but pace the floor, and send messengers to inquire how you are getting on."

"Why does he not go away?" Ethelind asked, in a constrained voice.

"And leave you like this?"

"I could recover just as well without him."

Mrs. Falkner gave way to a feeling of half-angry impatience.

"I don't know the reason of your singular words and actions, Ethelind, and I have no desire to inquire into it. But really you ought to give Raymond credit for possessing a little lover-like sympathy."

No answer.

"He sent me to inquire how soon the wedding can take place."

Ethelind hid her face in the pillow and shuddered.

"Put it off as long as possible—that is all I ask," she said, and then she broke out crying, hysterically.

CHAPTER IV.

THE LADY OF LORN.

A LITTLE less than two miles distant from Glenoaks, on a steep declivity overlooking the broad blue waters of the bay that finally lost itself in the blue brine of the Atlantic, stood a dark, weird, gloomy old house known far and near by the singular, but in this case appropriate, name of Lorn.

"A 'lorn' mansion it was in truth, standing solitary and alone on its eminence, and ever presenting the same dark, gray, forbidding aspect to the world, as if defying the ravaging hand of time itself. It was

"A house—but under some prodigious ban
Of excommunication."

Shame, misfortune, or death had speedily overtaken its different owners, one after another, until the simple country folk were led to avoid the desolate mansion as a place accursed, and it was left to molder tenantless and forsaken, as its prophetic name implied.

Suddenly the whole countryside was electrified by the rumor that a wealthy young widow, Mrs. Faunce, had purchased Lorn, and was coming to take possession immediately—possibly to bury some deep sorrow in the seclusion it offered.

A few days later, vans of handsome furniture began to arrive, pictures in boxes, musical instruments, and various articles of *vertu* and interest which went to show that the new owner of Lorn must be a lady of culture and aesthetic tastes.

At length Mrs. Faunce arrived with her little retinue of servants. The young widow betrayed no inclination to cultivate the acquaintance of her neighbors, however. She denied herself to everybody who called, and all that the outer world saw of her was the occasional vision of a slender veiled figure standing on the balconies or restlessly pacing the weed-choked paths that interlaced each other throughout the grounds.

Late one sultry afternoon—it was two days subsequent to the interrupted wedding at Glenoaks—two of the women servants were engaged in dusting and cleansing one of the long passages branching off from the main hall, when Mrs. Faunce drew near. She had on the disguising mantle she always wore when not in her own private apartments, and the obnoxious veil covered and concealed her face.

Only one servant out of all that household had ever seen her dressed differently, and that one was Joan Withers, the gaunt little old woman with the yellow face and crooked shoulders, who started up from her knees, and stood in respectful silence while her mistress drew near.

The other, Phœbe Jelly, had been picked up in New York just before the removal to Lorn; and to her Mrs. Faunce was, and had been from the first, an embodied mystery. The girl would have given her right hand, almost, for the privilege of seeing that shrouded figure divested of all disguise.

"Joan," Mrs. Faunce said, in a low, melodious voice, as she languidly approached, "the picture of the 'Crucifixion' is to be hung in the vacant space between those windows, and the marble copy of the Virgin and child placed on a stand underneath it. You may instruct Martin accordingly."

"Yes, madam."

"The 'Last Supper' will show to the best advantage against the blank wall opposite."

"It shall find a place there, madam."

"You understand all my whims and fancies, Joan," went on the sorrowfully sweet voice.

"The other arrangements I shall give over entirely into your hands."

"You can trust me, dear lady."

Mrs. Faunce passed on. The instant she had disappeared Phœbe turned to her companion and said in a hurried whisper:

"Joan, why does our mistress invariably appear among us in that disguise?"

"She has her reasons for it, I suppose," was the cold reply.

"It is very strange. I have been here a week to-day, and have never seen her face."

"Humph. Had you been here all the weeks in a month, and months in a year, you might still be compelled to make the same acknowledgment."

"You might as well say I'm a fool, and done with it," Phœbe angrily exclaimed.

Joan smiled, shrugged her crooked shoulders, and went on equably with her work.

"I'll see what she looks like before I'm many days older, and know the reason why!" Phœbe muttered, sullenly.

"Humph! Take my advice, and never meddle with what doesn't concern you. It is the safest way."

"Joan, do you know why Mrs. Faunce so persistently hides her face?"

"I may—or may not."

"Perhaps she has been frightfully disfigured by small-pox."

Joan made no reply.

"Or had portions of her face eaten away by a cancer."

No answer.

"Or is rendered hideous by some livid birthmark."

Silence still.

"Why don't you speak, Joan?" Phœbe irritably demanded. "Does Mrs. Faunce go about vaunted because her countenance is too frightful to look upon?"

"You must draw your own conclusions; I have no information to give."

Phœbe started up, as if tempted to throw her dusting-brush at the woman's head.

"You are a provoking old witch, Joan! Whatever the mystery, I am sure her husband's death had nothing to do with it, or with the seclusion in which she lives. By the way, when and where did Mr. Faunce die?"

"I do not keep the family record."

"What! you won't even tell me that?"

"I prefer not to speak of any matter that my mistress shows a disposition to keep to herself."

"Oh, I'd like to shake you!" gasped Phœbe.

"Well, keep your secrets. One of these days I shall learn all about them without any help from you."

"Perhaps."

After a short silence, Phœbe added in a meditative tone:

"It is very possible that Mrs. Faunce has taken a vow to wear a veil for a certain period, as a penance for some real or fancied sin."

Joan smiled again.

"Do you know why she settled down in this lonely place?"

"Yes."

"And approve so singular a whim?"

"No, I cannot truthfully say that I do approve it. But Mrs. Faunce is very self-willed, and it is useless to oppose any caprice she sets her heart upon carrying out."

Having uttered these words, Joan shut her lips firmly together, and picking up brush and broom, hurried down the passage as if anxious to put an end to the catechism.

Phœbe kept on at her work for some time longer; but curiosity had been excited to fever-pitch, and she suddenly resolved to gratify it at whatever hazard.

"Here's a mystery right under my nose," she thought; "and that horrid old woman laughs at me and shrugs her shoulders as much as to say 'Hands off.' I'll find out what it means if I die for it."

Glancing half fearfully all round, and listening intently for a moment or two, Phœbe stole on tiptoe down the passage, and after doubling several corners, reached at length a door that stood slightly ajar.

In this room—a sort of boudoir—Mrs. Faunce usually sat. She was within at that very moment—the sound of her voice, reading aloud, fell upon Phœbe's ear as she paused, trembling and palpitating, with her hand on the knob. There was a mournful cadence in those low, bell-like tones, that strangely impressed the listener.

At length the girl gathered courage to cross the threshold. The room was large and lofty, and furnished with exquisite taste. Mrs. Faunce sat at the upper end, an Indian screen of elabo-

rate design concealing her from the view of any one standing in the passage.

Stealing forward with a soft, gliding movement, Phœbe pushed her head inch by inch, beyond the margin of the screen. Mrs. Faunce sat with her back toward her. The obnoxious vail lay on a chair within reach. Her head, now fully exposed to view, was purely classic in its outlines; immense coils of purplish black hair, pure and shining as bands of richest satin, surmounted it. Her countenance was bidden; only one ear, exquisitely tinted as a sea-shell, and the delicate formation of the shapely chin, were visible.

The musical tones died abruptly away. Mrs. Faunce must have caught a glimpse of the intruder in the full-length mirror that hung opposite, for, uttering an angry exclamation, she suddenly caught up the vail, threw it over her head and face, and confronted the now thoroughly-frightened girl.

"What is your business here?" she haughtily demanded.

"I—I—thought you rung," stammered Phœbe, cowering under the intense glare of eyes that seemed fairly to scorch her face, even through the thick folds of the vail they had to penetrate.

"Joan always answers my bell. I believed the arrangement was generally understood."

"Forgive me, madam. I meant no harm."

Mrs. Faunce made a gesture of impatience.

"Enough. Your motive in thus intruding is clearly palpable to me."

"Oh, madam, I'm sorry enough now for what I have done," ejaculated Phœbe, clasping her hands. "Only say that you will forgive me."

"Very well. The first offense shall be pardoned, but I warn you not to repeat it. No one, not even Joan, presumes to enter this room without first knocking for permission."

She haughtily waved her hand as a sign of dismissal, and when Phœbe had shrunk out at the door looking very crestfallen, this strange woman turned, and began walking up and down with hurried, uneven steps.

"I might have known that the mystery in which I choose to enshroud myself would awaken curiosity in vulgar minds," she muttered. "Shall I gain anything whatever by this new caprice? Oh, pitying Heaven," she cried, wildly throwing up her clasped hands, "help me or I perish! Oh, would that I had slept in my grave long ago! It would have been better for me—far better for others!"

Before the paroxysm had passed, Joan's muffled sobs were heard at the door. Mrs. Faunce's face still remained hidden, but the faithful servant knew by her quick and labored breathing that something unusual had occurred.

"Oh, madam, what is it?" she exclaimed, coming forward quickly. "Are you ill?"

"Only the old complaint—heart-ache."

"You are trembling."

"It does not matter."

"I am sure you do wrong to remain in this gloomy old place," said Joan, earnestly. "It has a depressing effect. Do come away, dear child. Let us leave the country."

"Let me alone. I prefer to remain at Lorn."

"But you are growing more gloomy and despondent every day we linger here. Do come away."

"Be still," Mrs. Faunce responded, in a tone of command. "I have a mission to fulfill. I cannot go until it is accomplished. There is too much at stake."

With a laugh that fairly curdled the listener's blood, Mrs. Faunce caught up the long black mantle that was lying on one of the couches, and wrapping it round her, glided to the French casement opening upon the lawn, and proceeded to unfasten it with unsteady fingers.

"Oh, my poor child!" cried Joan, springing forward, and clinging to her sleeve. "Surely you will not leave the house in your present mood?"

"Let me go—let me go, I say!"

"But it is late—it will soon be dark. And look at the sky. In half an hour's time, the rain will be pouring in torrents."

She pointed to the darkened heavens, along which a few fleecy clouds were scurrying underneath the gray, unbroken canopy that covered up, like a pall, the pale stars that should have blossomed out of the twilight. Afar off could be heard the faint, low roar of old ocean, moaning like a stricken soul in pain.

Mrs. Faunce pushed off the hands that sought to detain her.

"I am stifling here," she gasped. "The house seems to be haunted to-night—haunted by memories of the past. I shall lose my reason unless I flee from them all."

As she spoke, the strange woman stepped out at the window, and as if some restless demon were in her feet, hurried over the weed-grown terrace, and down the neglected path beyond, never once pausing or looking back until she had reached and climbed one of the highest cliffs overlooking the bay.

It was quite dark by this time, but as Mrs. Faunce bared her hot temples to the cool breezes that sighed and wailed around the place, she suddenly became aware that she was not alone. Close to the verge of the cliff stood the slender figure of a woman with a white crape shawl drawn closely about her head. The pale glimmer of this wrapping through the dusk was what had first attracted the attention of Mrs. Faunce. Quickly replacing her vail, she stood motionless, staring at the unexpected vision.

Only for a moment. Suddenly an odd sound, half-sob, half-scream, fell from the woman's lips, and she took a single step forward, crying with uplifted hands:

"God be merciful to me a sinner!"

The next instant she would have thrown herself into the treacherous gloom that had crept up the precipitous side of the cliff, like a bodily presence, had not Mrs. Faunce clutched desperately hold of her skirts, and drawn her back.

"What would you do?"

Ethelind—for it was she—raised her head, and looked fiercely, with glittering eyes, at the person who had saved her from self-destruction.

"Release me!" she cried, wildly. "But for you all would have been over—I should have found rest."

"Ay, such rest as awaits the suicide."

"It is easier to bear the torments of the damned in the next world than in this."

"Why?"

"Because there you will be driven to madness by neither the pity nor the contempt of so-called friends."

Mrs. Faunce drew back, looking at the girl who could give utterance to such wicked sentiments, with a new interest. It almost seemed as if a bond of fellow-feeling had sprung up between them all at once.

"Of course you think me very desperate, very wicked," Ethelind went on, in a rapid tone; "and you are right. This is the second time I have been saved from the sin of taking my own life. And yet I do not wish to live. Ah, you may despise me, but you can never know through what sloughs of despond I have been called to pass!"

"What is your name?" Mrs. Faunce gently asked, after a short silence.

"Ethelind Erle."

Was it imagination, or did Mrs. Faunce actually start backward a step or two, and clench her teeth, at the mention of that name?

"I have heard of you." Her voice certainly had an odd, constrained sound. "You live at Glenoaks, and are Colonel Falkner's ward?"

"Yes. And you?"

"I am the Mrs. Faunce who has recently purchased Lorn."

Ethelind dropped her hand on the woman's sleeve, and looked up at her again, as if anxious to penetrate the thick folds of the muffling vail.

"I ought to thank you, Mrs. Faunce, for your efforts to save me—but how can I, when I do not even feel grateful? It is so hard to live—it would have been so easy to die! I had quite persuaded myself that I was justified in putting an end to my troubles."

Mrs. Faunce laughed derisively.

"Troubles?" she echoed. "You do not know the meaning of the word. Poor, foolish child! Wait until your heart has been scathed and blistered by such anguish and shame as would have killed any other woman outright—then, indeed, you will have some excuse for talking of self-destruction."

Turning as she spoke, without even a word of adieu, the strange woman began to descend the cliff with a slow and measured tread. When the darkness had swallowed up the deeper gloom of her retreating figure, Ethelind threw herself on a boulder, and tossed back the shawl from her hot brow. But her face was now turned resolutely away from the black abyss of gloom that had tempted her.

The moments sped on, the darkness deepened, and presently a few scattering drops of rain began to fall. The wind crept up from the broad bosom of the bay, damp and chill, and the rain fell faster and faster, but the miserable girl still crouched there, with uncovered head, motionless as a statue.

CHAPTER V.

AT DEAD OF NIGHT.

It was past ten o'clock when a drenched, shivering figure glided like a spirit up the elm-shaded avenue leading to Glenoaks, and crept close to the drawing-room windows, whence a broad glare of light streamed into the twofold gloom of night and storm. A wild, white face glued itself for a moment to the glass.

Within, all was warmth and brightness. Dolores Gloyne sat at the piano, singing a pathetic old ballad. Colonel Falkner stood beside her in the attitude of an attentive listener. Raymond Challoner was listlessly turning a book of engravings at the other end of the room, his brows knitted, his handsome face looking dark and inscrutable. Since the night of the interrupted wedding, he had not absented himself from Glenoaks even for an hour.

The poor creature standing without in the cold and rain uttered a fierce, irrepressible cry as her glance rested for a moment upon his handsome face. It was the passionate expression of the hatred that filled her heart. Then she drew back quickly. Had the sound reached Colonel Falkner's ears? At any rate she saw him start, and turn his eyes toward the window.

Ethelind slunk away like a guilty creature. Where should she go? All the doors would be locked at that hour of the night, and she did not wish to exhibit herself to the servants in her drenched condition. And yet the general glow and comfort within seemed strangely desirable all at once.

Crouching in the wet shrubbery, Ethelind noticed presently, a little further on, a second gleam of light. It proceeded from an apartment Mrs. Falkner used as her own private sitting-room. Shaking the rain from her garments, Ethelind crept up to the window, and tapped softly on the pane.

"Who's there?" said a voice.

"Let me come in," panted Ethelind, trying to peer into the room through the folds of crimson silk drawn across the window. "I am wet through."

"Who's there?" again came the angry demand.

"It is I—Ethelind. For heaven's sake, Mrs. Falkner, do not alarm the house."

The next instant she heard a heavy step cross the floor, the curtains were flung back, and a resolute hand opened wide the window. But it was Colonel Falkner's face—not his mother's—that Ethelind saw, almost touching her own. He had seen her at the drawing-room window, after all.

"Child, are you mad?" he uttered, drawing her quickly into the room. "Why have you exposed yourself in this reckless fashion?"

She made no reply, but stood before him with heaving chest and glittering eyes.

"This is wrong, wicked, Ethelind. I am shocked at your conduct. You have no right to tamper with life and health as you are doing."

"Who cares for life—or health?" she broke out passionately. "I'm tempted to rush back into the pitiless storm again."

"No, you shall not, though I am compelled to prevent such an act of folly by brute force."

Mrs. Falkner now drew near. She had been standing at a little distance, trying to rally from the shock and fright of the sudden summons at the window, and the abrupt manner in which her son had burst into the room.

"I hadn't the least idea it was you tapping for admittance," she said, dropping her hand on Ethelind's shoulder. "You gave me quite a start. We thought you were up-stairs, in your own room, scarcely able to sit up. Instead of that you have been exposed to this dreadful storm. Oh, you rash, headstrong girl! You deserve to be severely punished."

Ethelind wrenched herself petulantly away.

"Let me alone. The rain will not hurt me. I do not mind getting wet. It cools the fever here," and she clasped both hands to her throbbing temples.

"You must take a warm bath, and put on dry clothing at once."

"Why must I? I am not afraid of taking cold, and getting the fever, if that is what you mean," Ethelind answered, seating herself in one of the chairs.

Colonel Falkner glanced keenly into her face. It was of an ashy whiteness, but wore a cold, hard, defiant expression, in which there was little that could be appealed to. Turning to his mother he said, in an undertone:

"Please leave us alone for a few moments. She is in a very bitter mood. I can manage her much better by myself."

Mrs. Falkner hesitated. In fact she felt not a little afraid of the influence this reckless, im-

pulsive girl might exert upon her son. But the emergency did not admit of delay, and she reluctantly retreated.

"Ethelind," Colonel Falkner said, in softer accents, bending over the girl the moment they were alone together, "I hope you will be perfectly frank with me and tell me why you talk and behave so strangely."

"I have told you—I told you that dreadful night," she answered, panting faintly. "It is only forty-eight hours since—it seems like so many years. My madness began then."

"Poor child. Is it possible that the contemplated marriage has caused you all this misery?"

As she did not reply, except to droop her head still lower with a shrinking shiver, he added, after a pause:

"Oh, why did you so recklessly pledge your hand if your heart could not go with it?"

"That is over and done with. If my motives are not clear to you, I shall not explain them further."

"Such a wicked marriage ought never to be consummated."

She suddenly flung up her hands, with such a gasp as a drowning person might have given.

"Will you save me from it?" she whispered.

"I will do anything in my power. I have already spoken to Raymond Challoner in your behalf."

"And he?"

"Puts in the plea of his absorbing love, and refuses to release you. He says you will become reconciled as soon as the ceremony is once over."

"Do you believe it, Colonel Falkner? Do you think I can ever learn to look upon him with toleration?"

"I cannot tell. You are a strange girl, Ethelind. I should be at a loss what to predict."

Her scornful laugh rung out startlingly loud.

"This miserable affair will end in my doing mischief to Raymond Challoner or myself. So much you may safely prophesy."

"Hush, Ethelind."

"During the past few hours I have felt desperate enough to kill him!"

Colonel Falkner drew himself aloof, and a cold expression of disapproval crossed his face. He sternly said:

"I really cannot listen to such delirious ravings. I command you to be more guarded in your speech."

"I am your slave—I obey," she derisively answered.

There was a silence. While it lasted Ethelind sat with her face hidden in her hands. At length she looked up and abruptly said, in a hoarse, eager whisper:

"I want you to tell me more about that woman—you know who I mean. You wear her picture over your heart. What is her name?"

"Olympia Verne."

"Where is she now?"

"Her body lies in the grave; her soul is, I trust, with God."

The solemn reply, so utterly unexpected, startled and awed Ethelind for a moment. The next she was conscious of a fierce thrill of joy. It was only a dead rival, after all, that she had to fear in this man's affections!

"I am glad," she exclaimed. "I must have hated the woman if she had lived."

Colonel Falkner's features seemed to be slowly hardening into marble.

"Ethelind, you shock and grieve me," he said. "I can bear no more. Will you not go quietly to your room?"

"Yes, I am ready to go now."

She rose, gathered up her dripping shawl, which had been suffered to slip from her shoulders, and with a strange smile on her face, went out.

Colonel Falkner followed her, after a brief interval. His mother stood in the hall alone, when he entered from the sitting-room. She looked at him uneasily, and whispered:

"Ethelind has gone up-stairs. She is literally drenched to the skin. What is to be done?"

"Nothing," he answered. "You cannot compel the perverse child to take care of herself. It is the best policy not to go near her."

Mrs. Falkner sighed heavily.

"I never saw a person change so for the worse. Until after this engagement with Raymond Challoner she seemed all that was sweet-tempered and tractable."

He quickly averted his face. The subject of this marked change in Ethelind was one he felt unwilling, for several reasons, to discuss. His heart ached with a pain akin to remorse when he remembered that he had himself unwittingly been instrumental in bringing it about.

"Ethelind is still a child in years as well as in experience," he said, presently. "We must bear that fact in mind, and be lenient in our judgment."

"You can always find some excuse for her conduct," muttered Mrs. Falkner, impatiently. "However, I hope you have the good sense not to suffer yourself to be drawn under the spell of her youth and beauty."

"My heart is dead and buried in a foreign grave," he answered, in a low, constrained tone. "It can never be resurrected."

Mrs. Falkner glanced quickly at her son, and breathed another sigh. She knew that he alluded to some sorrowful episode in his life abroad—a history so sad, so touching and full of heartbreak that he had never found courage to relate it, even to her. Even now she dared not question him.

"Ethelind looked like a mad-woman when she passed me a few moments since," she said, returning to the former subject. "I am really afraid she will do harm to herself, or somebody else, if this folly goes on much longer."

The same sickening fear had been beating at Colonel Falkner's own heart, and he said quickly:

"I shall keep a watchful eye on her movements for the present. Is there a vacant room in the same corridor where I could sleep tonight?"

"None. What do you apprehend?" Mrs. Falkner replied, looking amazed at the question.

"The impetuous child might attempt to leave the house again, and I would be near to prevent the commission of such a reckless and foolish act."

"Mr. Challoner's room is near the entrance to the corridor. Ethelind would be compelled to pass it in going out. If you wish, I will make some excuse for assigning to him a room in the other wing."

"Pray do so, said Colonel Falkner, eagerly. "And it is quite unnecessary that any one else should be told of the arrangement."

"Very well."

An hour later Colonel Falkner found himself comfortably ensconced in the room in question, one of the handsomest in the house. Extinguishing his light he stepped to the window, and threw up the sash. The rain had ceased, and the moon was visible, threading its way through silvery rifts in the cloud. Pale gleams of lightning could be seen, ever and anon, playing about the horizon. The air had grown sultry and sluggish all at once, and he leaned out at the window almost gasping for breath. Directly underneath was the flat roof of the veranda, and he finally stepped out altogether, expanding his chest to catch what little air was stirring.

The waves, as they lapped the distant beach, still kept up their low, monotonous monologue, and a startled night-bird, now and then, fled screaming by. But no other sounds broke the solemn silence.

The windows of Ethelind's sitting-room could be seen from where he stood, and her bedchamber was next beyond. No gleam of light issued from the one or the other, however, and after watching and waiting for another hour, Colonel Falkner re-entered his own room, and leaving the window still open, threw himself, dressed as he was, upon the bed.

Still thinking of Ethelind, of her foolish passion for himself, which he felt utterly unable to reciprocate, and of the distressing predicament in which she had involved herself by rushing into that rash engagement with Raymond Challoner, he finally fell asleep.

After a long interval he awoke with a start, experiencing a sudden, mysterious consciousness that he was not alone. The instant he opened his eyes he saw dimly, as in a dream, the dusky figure of a woman bending over the bed. Before his half-stunned mind could gather a realizing sense that the shadowy presence was a reality, however, there came an odd sound, like a strangled groan, a dusky hand cleft the air, and he instantly felt a sharp, stinging, half-maddening pain in his left arm, as if some sharp instrument had buried itself in the quivering flesh.

Colonel Falkner was a brave man, and though nearly crazed with pain, not a sound escaped his lips. Turning an intent gaze toward the window, he saw the woman hurry toward it with a rustling sound, and slip over the sill. At this instant the moon struggled suddenly through the clouds that had obscured it, and its cold, pale light fell full on the midnight assassin ere she disappeared.

Her face was in shadow, but Colonel Falkner

saw distinctly the dark outlines of her dress, contrasting strangely with the spectral whiteness of a crape shawl that had been drawn tightly over her head and shoulders and fastened under her chin. He thought he recognized that shawl, and a horrible, sickening suspicion caused his brain to whirl and his heart to stand still.

CHAPTER VI. WHO DEALT THE BLOW?

For fully five minutes Colonel Falkner remained as motionless as though the would-be murderer had accomplished her purpose, and life itself had ebbed away. But, at the end of this period the pain in his wounded arm became too excruciating for further endurance, and he pulled the bell-rope that hung just above his head.

Another five minutes of the keenest torture elapsed, and at length a heavy step approached the door. A sleepy-looking servant, bearing a lamp, looked in.

"Did you ring, Mr. Challoner?" the man asked, as he stood rubbing his eyes just inside the door.

"It is not Mr. Challoner, John—it is I, your master."

The man took another step into the room at the sound of Colonel Falkner's voice. A strange look of surprise was on his face.

"Bless me!" he ejaculated. "I was not aware that you had changed rooms with Mr. Challoner. Do you want anything, sir?"

"Come here, John," said the colonel, quietly.

"I have been hurt, I think."

"Hurt?" The man stepped up to the bed, his face growing white as a sheet as he leaned over it. The first object he beheld was the bristling head of a dagger, outlined against the snowy counterpane Colonel Falkner had drawn over him when he first threw himself on the couch.

"My God!" he gasped. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Don't stop to ask questions, man. Do you think you can pull the dagger out? It has pinned my arm so tightly to the mattress that I am unable to move it."

John set down his lamp, but his hands were trembling to such an extent that at the first trial he only succeeded in loosening the dagger. A shiver of pain ran through the colonel's frame. Only by clenching his teeth could he refrain from screaming outright.

"Take care. Now that is better. Thank you, John."

When the dagger was fully withdrawn, and the counterpane thrown back, Colonel Falkner saw that his wounded arm was already bathed in blood. But his first thought was not of himself.

"John, let me see the dagger," he said, in a faint voice.

The servant held out the gory weapon. One glance sufficed. It belonged in the house—was, in fact, the very same that had lain in the cabinet in the room occupied by Dolores Gloyne.

"Who could have done this deed?" inquired John, in amazement.

"It is impossible to tell, and we have no time to waste in idle conjecture. I have already lost more blood than is good for me. You may cut off my sleeve, and bind up the wound as well as you are able."

"But I have no scissors."

"Take your pocket-knife—or the dagger. I am sure," speaking with a wince of pain, "that the latter is sharp enough for your purpose."

Colonel Falkner was deadly pale, and his features all distorted with pain, but the perfect self-command he exerted over his physical nature had the effect of reassuring the frightened servant. After some difficulty he succeeded in tearing away the sleeve, fully exposing the wound to view. It was a ghastly sight, and the blood still flowed from it copiously.

"Now take my handkerchief and your own, and bind them tightly, the one above and the other below the wound."

This command was executed after some bungling, and drawing away, with a sigh of relief, John said, earnestly:

"In my opinion, that's an ugly hurt, sir. Hadn't I better fetch Dr. Lance?"

"Yes, you may go at once. Steal away quietly, without alarming anybody in the house."

"Who will watch you, sir?"

"If you are expeditious, I shall do very well while you are away."

His brain was beginning to whirl, and a deadly numbness to creep round his heart. But, as he hid his writhing face in the pillow, John left

the room without realizing the critical condition in which he left his master.

Proceeding to his own sleeping-room, the man finished dressing himself, jammed his hat over his eyes, and was hurrying from the house, when the door of Mrs. Falkner's chamber opened, and she stepped into the hall. She carried a lamp, and had drawn on a white dressing-gown and thrown a shawl over her shoulders.

"Where are you going, John, at this hour of the night?" she asked, recognizing the servant after the first startled glance.

He stood stock-still, gasping with dismay. His white, working face told its own story.

"What is wrong?" she demanded, in a frightened voice, dropping her hand upon his arm. "Tell me the truth at once."

The poor fellow lost his presence of mind entirely, and blurting some unintelligible words, of which the bewildered woman could only distinguish "murder," and the name of her son, he broke from her hold and rushed into the open air.

Mrs. Falkner groped her way up the stairs, like one upon whom sudden blindness had fallen. When she entered the room above, the bloody dagger lay right before her on the table, where John had left it. She sprung to the bed, faintly panting.

"Oh, Philip! Oh, my son!"

He had swooned with pain and loss of blood. The poor mother believed he was dead. She flung herself down beside him, and filled the whole house with her screams.

Ethelind Erle was the first person who, aroused by Mrs. Falkner's cries, came hurrying to the chamber. She had put off her wet garments, and was dressed all in black. Even the plain collar and cuffs she usually wore with so simple a toilet, were properly adjusted. Evidently she had not been in bed at all that night.

She did not speak, she did not cry out. After a single horrified glance at the weltering figure on the couch, she sunk down on the nearest chair, and hid her face. But ever and anon a shiver shook her from head to foot.

Raymond Challoner, Dolores Gloyne, and the other members of the household made their appearance soon afterward. There were broken cries and ejaculations, and a great hurrying to and fro. Raymond was the first to recover his presence of mind.

"Oh, who has done this deed of horror?" he exclaimed.

Dolores put out her trembling hand and caught his.

"Is it—is it—murder?" she gasped.

"Of course. Colonel Falkner was not the sort of man to take his own life. What could have been the assassin's motive?"

"Robbery, perhaps."

"No; don't you see that the poor man's watch and rings are undisturbed?" He hesitated a moment, an odd expression crossing his face. "I wonder if that deadly dagger-thrust was not intended for me? This is the room I have always occupied until to-night. The assassin could not have been aware of any change in the arrangements; and in the darkness one person might easily be taken for another."

Dolores looked startled and frightened.

"What a dreadful thought!" she exclaimed. Raymond turned silently away. Yes, it was dreadful! It made his flesh creep. Yet the more he reflected upon it the stronger grew his conviction that it was even so.

Suddenly a long, loud scream once more concentrated the thoughts of all upon the injured man and his mother. Mrs. Falkner had raised herself on one elbow and was gazing intently at her son.

"He lives—he lives!" she faintly panted.

There came a faint quiver about Colonel Falkner's drooping lids, and a long sigh heaved his bosom. He was just rousing out of the swoon into which he had fallen when the servant-man left him. But, to those gathered round the couch, it seemed as if his spirit had unexpectedly returned from the confines of the other world.

CHAPTER VII.

THE STRANGE VISITANT.

COLONEL FALKNER'S eyes were dazed and wild when at last he opened them and stared all round.

"Where am I?" he said. "What has happened?"

Mrs. Falkner could not answer for her sobs. Bending down, she laid her face close to his, and held him fast for a moment.

At length Ethelind rose and tottered toward

the couch. The instant the wounded man saw her, he seemed to shrink away with a gesture of loathing and horror that was utterly beyond his control.

"Don't let her touch me!" he cried.

Ethelind answered nothing, but sat down again, looking stunned and helpless.

After a long interval Dr. Lance came. He dressed his patient's wounds, gave him a sedative, and when the fever and pain had somewhat abated, began to inquire into the manner in which the injury had been received.

Colonel Falkner became sullen and reticent in a moment.

"I would rather not speak of it," he said, shuddering violently. "Let me alone."

"We wish to expose and punish the person who attempted your life, if you can point him out," said Mrs. Falkner, gently but resolutely.

He shook his head.

"I can give you no clew."

"The man entered through the window, of course?"

"The man? It was no—" The words faltered on his tongue. Turning his face to the wall, he added, in a changed voice:

"You must not question me—I am not fit to discuss the subject. I can tell you nothing."

Nothing more was said after that. His wound was of a painful rather than dangerous character; but he bore the suffering without a murmur. The only instance in which he gave way to his feelings was when Ethelind persisted in remaining in the room.

"Take her away," he cried, violently. "I can't endure her here. She drives me beside myself."

Mrs. Falkner was puzzled. She could not understand why he should betray this sudden antipathy toward the heart-broken girl.

"It isn't at all strange," said Dr. Lance, in an undertone. "Of course his wound makes him feverish and nervous. Persons are often unreasonable and whimsical in such an illness."

Hours had passed, and the next day was well advanced, when Colonel Falkner, rousing out of a stupor that was not sleep, though closely resembling it, heard his mother's voice speaking earnestly to some one just outside the door. A few minutes later, the thud of horse's hoofs could be distinguished, galloping down the avenue. His mind was just in condition to take alarm at trifles.

"Who has gone away?" he asked, calling his mother in.

"I have sent John to the nearest village on an errand."

"What errand?"

She hesitated a moment, but he repeated the question in a firmer voice than before.

"Vincent Erle is in New York, you are aware, attending to some matters of business he went to arrange, three days ago."

"Well?"

"I have telegraphed for him to see Detective Ferret, and send him down to Glenoaks immediately."

Colonel Falkner uttered a startled cry. The detective's name was well known in the neighborhood, he having been employed in a notorious burglary case in the village, some two months before.

"Oh, mother. Why have you done this?"

"Because I am determined to get to the bottom of that affair of last night," she answered, in a low, resolute tone. "No person's life shall be threatened, with impunity, in this house; least of all my son's."

It was too late for remonstrance, so he tried to calm himself and said:

"Of course you will act your own pleasure in the matter. But it will be of no use, I warn you, to bring Detective Ferret here."

"That remains to be seen."

For some time he lay silent and thoughtful, a troubled look on his face. When he spoke again it was upon an altogether different subject.

"Mother," he said, very low, "I'm afraid I acted rudely toward Ethelind last night, and again this morning."

"There certainly was something singular in your behavior."

"I am very sorry. Will you send her to me that I may ask her pardon?"

Mrs. Falkner went out, and was gone some moments, but at length returned to say that Miss Erle was not in the house—that she had gone out for a walk early in the afternoon.

The sick man breathed a sigh that seemed to express relief.

"Never mind," he said. "You can speak to her when she returns."

It was not until after the lamps were lighted in the evening that a pale, drooping figure stole

into the room and approached the bed. Turning on his pillow, Colonel Falkner put out his right hand, speaking her name.

"Ethelind!"

She sprung forward with a gasp and a sob, seizing his hand, and covering it with her kisses and tears.

"Thank God!" she exclaimed. "I feel that you are not angry with me now!"

"Poor child! Poor, misguided child!"

"There is to be peace between us at last!"

"Ay, peace."

"But you draw away from me, still!" she cried, suddenly and sharply. "I see a strange, shrinking expression in your eyes, as if you could not bear to look at me."

"It is only your fancy," he answered, but he shuddered.

"It is there—you cannot hide it from me. I thought at first it was gone; but it isn't."

She crouched down beside the bed, sobbing as if her heart was broken. The sick man glanced at her uneasily, ever and anon.

"How can I persuade you that we are friends once more?" he asked, at length.

"There is one test that would be convincing."

"What is it?"

"Send away every other nurse, and permit me to watch with you through the night."

Her voice was husky with passionate entreaty. She could not bear the thought of being dismissed from his presence, and in the solitude of her room be mocked by the knowledge that he suffered, and she could do nothing to relieve him.

Her motive was misunderstood. Colonel Falkner stared aghast, at first, as if doubting if he heard aright. But gradually a very different expression stole over his features.

"It is best," he thought. "It will help stem the tide of suspicion. For her sake I must consent. But, oh, it seems too dreadful! I wonder that she had either the courage or the cunning to propose it."

Perfectly aware that the girl's intense gaze never left him for a moment, he said aloud, after a brief hesitation:

"It is strange that you should voluntarily take a troublesome vigil on yourself—and you will find this anything but pleasant."

"Then you do consent?" she cried, eagerly. "I will not harass you in any manner—I promise to sit quietly, not even speaking to you without your permission."

"Yes, I consent."

She did not thank him in words, but her kisses and tears fell upon his hand more plentifully than ever, and he was compelled to draw it away.

Mrs. Falkner seemed displeased when told of the arrangement—she had expected to nurse her son that first night herself. But she made no comment.

Ethelind kept her word. When she re-entered the room she did not speak to the wounded man at all, but sat down at some distance from the bed. And there she remained for hours, motionless as a figure carved in marble, betraying no signs of life except at the rare intervals when some womanly office was to be rendered.

At first the sight of her pale face and great, staring eyes, always turned immovably toward the bed, troubled Colonel Falkner. But he became reconciled to them at length, and shortly before midnight fell into a fretful sleep.

His slumber seemed to be haunted by dreams, for presently he began to mutter unintelligible sentences. Ethelind caught a name, at last, spoken more distinctly than the other words, and yielding to the impulse of the moment she drew nearer, and bent over him.

"I want Olympia," he said, in a pleading voice. "It is strange she doesn't come."

The miserable girl gave a groan of utter anguish, and fell back in her chair.

"Even his dreams are of that woman," she uttered. "He never thinks of me!"

While the jealous, half-frenzied creature sat there, with her hands tightly clasped on her bosom as if to still its wild throbings, there came a faint sound, no louder than the pecking of a bird, upon the window-pane. Looking around, she saw something dark, like a human figure, standing on the flat roof of the veranda, the other side of the glass.

Hurriedly crossing the floor she threw up the sash; and as she did this a cold hand fell upon her, and she felt herself drawn irresistibly forward.

"Do not be frightened," whispered a voice, which at first she failed to recognize. "I do not come here for any evil purpose."

At this moment the lamp light streaming through the window fell brightly upon the fig-

WIFE OR WIDOW?

ure of the intruder, and Ethelind saw, with a thrill of superstitious dread, that it was the veiled lady of Lorn, Mrs. Faunce.

"How did you get here?" she asked, in amazement.

"I climbed the iron steps at the far end of the veranda."

"Oh!" Ethelind remembered them at once—a flight of very steep stairs, that were considered unsafe, and had long fallen into disuse. "What do you want?" she abruptly demanded.

"They tell me that he has been injured—Colonel Falkner! I could not rest until I knew the worst. It seems like the act of a mad-woman to come here like this. But oh, if you knew what I suffer you would pity me."

Seizing hold of Ethelind's arm, she cried in a husky, passionate voice:

"Tell me the truth. Is he dangerously injured?"

"We hope—we believe he is not."

"Thank God—thank God! Be merciful, and let me see him. Let me look once upon his face, and then I will go away again!"

CHAPTER VIII. DETECTIVE FERRET.

MRS. FAUNCE did not wait for permission, but passed swiftly through the open window, and approached the couch. The single lamp had burned low, and now flickered fitfully, sending weird shadows trooping over the carpet. A being of thick shadows that gloom-shrouded figure itself appeared, with its black garments, and the thick black vail muffling head and shoulders, and effectually concealing every feature. Ethelind could only stare after her in wonder and terror.

Pausing near the head of the bed, Mrs. Faunce stood motionless, looking down at the sleeper. Some muttered words that sounded like endearing epithets, fell from her lips. Presently she tossed her vail aside, with an impatient movement, and, still keeping her face in deep shadow, touched her lips to Colonel Falkner's forehead.

The lamp gave an expiring flicker, at the same instant, and went out altogether. From the direction of the couch came a smothered cry, but before Ethelind could grope her way through the thick darkness, Mrs. Faunce was again beside her.

"Thank you, Miss Erle," said the woman, in a strange, hollow voice. "You have done me a greater service than you are aware. I shall not forget it."

She was gone before Ethelind could collect her wits sufficiently to reply. The frightened girl passed into the chamber, shut and fastened the window, and groped her way to the chimney-piece, where she had seen a lamp and matches standing, earlier in the evening.

Having struck a light, she approached the bed. Colonel Falkner's eyes were wide open, a strange look of wonder and eagerness in their clear depths.

"Who was in the room just now?" he asked.

She dared not tell him.

"I have been here all the evening," she answered, evasively.

"I thought—I fancied—"

He broke off abruptly, and a heavy sigh escaped his lips.

"What did you think?" she impulsively said.

"It seems so strange, so wonderful," speaking in low, husky tones, and pressing one hand wearily to his forehead. "I must have dreamed it, for I imagined that the grave had given up its dead, and she was here, right beside me!"

"Of whom do you speak? Of Olympia?"

"Yes—of Olympia Verne."

Ethelind drew back, a sick feeling of dread and horror coming over her. Had she really seen a ghost?—or what was the explanation of the strange scene that had transpired?

"Are you sure this Olympia Verne is dead?" she asked, presently, with blanched lips.

"Sure?"

"Is it not possible that you may have been deceived?"

He shook his head.

"I saw her in the coffin, with my own eyes. There could have been no mistake. Oh, my God! it is too terribly certain that she is dead, and lost to me forever."

He turned slowly and painfully away, but Ethelind caught a glimpse of his face, and saw that it was fearfully distorted with anguish.

"Ah, how passionately he must have loved that woman," she thought.

Resuming her old position, she dropped her throbbing temples on her hands. In vain did she try to reason out the singular scene to which she had been a witness.

Had Mrs. Faunce known and loved this man.

long ago? What did it all mean? Why had her secret visit called up the memory of the dead Olympia? It all seemed so strange, so inexplicable.

The waning hours of that long night were hours of turmoil and heartache for the miserable girl. When at last the cold gray dawn crept sluggishly into the room, her face looked ghastly and worn, as if by the passage of years, Colonel Falkner himself soon observed her haggard expression.

"It was very good of you, Ethelind, to keep this wearisome vigil," he said, kindly. "But I fear you have overtaxed yourself."

She murmured some inaudible reply.

"Go, now, and lie down, my child. If I want anything, I can ring for one of the servants."

"Child!" For her life, she could not help echoing the word, and her tone was a bitter one. "Colonel Falkner, why do you persist in applying that hateful title to me? Child, indeed! This morning I feel that I must outrival the Wandering Jew himself in point of years."

A pitying smile trembled about the corners of his mouth.

"Forgive me. I find it hard to realize that you are no longer the inexperienced school-girl your father confided to my guardianship, five years ago."

"Suffering has made of me a woman."

"True. Again I crave your pardon." She rose, and moved proudly away, without venturing a reply. But, the instant she gained her own room, and had secured the door, she threw herself on the bed, and burst out crying.

The telegraphic dispatch Mrs. Falkner had sent to Vincent Erle at New York reached its destination in due season, and during the course of the day—the second subsequent to the attempted murder—Mr. Ferret, the member of the detective police, for whom she had asked, made his appearance at Glenoaks.

He proved to be a small, quiet-looking man of forty, with a thin, smoothly-shaven face, and piercing light gray eyes that had an odd knack of seeming to read one through and through at a glance.

Mrs. Falkner received him in her own room. She looked nervous and excited. There was something in the thought of having a police-officer in the house that well might have troubled a more phlegmatic person than Mrs. Falkner—especially, which was her case, if this happened to be the first experience of the sort.

"Of course," she began, turning a shade paler, as she pointed him to a chair, "of course you come prepared to work in our interests, or you would not be here at all."

"I shall do what I can, madam," was the grave reply.

"Very good. Pray make your investigations as quietly as possible; and, above all things, spare my son any unnecessary catechising. He is too ill to be troubled."

Detective Ferret turned his gray eyes quietly upon her face.

"I know nothing of the case, as yet, madam, not even the smallest particular. Who is to detail to me the circumstances that have already come to light?"

"I will."

Making a determined effort she went over the case carefully, so far as she was acquainted with it. Not a word was said concerning the sex of the would-be murderer, however, as Colonel Falkner had never spoken of his own discovery that it was a woman.

The detective listened attentively.

"It is proper to inquire, here at the outset, if your suspicions are directed against any particular person?" he said.

Mrs. Falkner replied in the negative.

"I am not aware that my son has an enemy in the world. And yet, robbery could not have been the motive that led to the crime. Nothing has been missed from the house—neither money nor trinkets."

"You expect me to discover the guilty party, and bring him to justice?"

"I do. An attempted crime of this nature is not to be passed lightly by."

"Very well. As I said before I shall do what I can."

He rose as he spoke.

"With your permission, I will now go the round of the premises."

"Certainly. If any of my servants can be of use to you, you are at liberty to command their services."

"Thank you. I prefer to make my own way among them, just at first."

He searched the house thoroughly, but without finding any evidence upon which to base a

possible theory to account for the attempted murder. Then he went outside. All the approaches to the veranda roof, and of course the roof itself, were carefully inspected. The only clew discovered here was the print of a shoe in the dust that had accumulated on the iron steps leading up from the terrace. But whether the print had been left by a large shoe or a small one it was impossible to tell, as the steps evidently had been dripping with rain at the time it was made, and the track had been elongated beyond its original dimensions.

Mr. Detective Ferret began to grow interested.

"Gleam of light the first," he muttered, his gray eyes brightening. "And a precious faint gleam it is! But crimes have been traced home to their perpetrators, before now, on evidence more trifling than this may prove to be."

Having vainly searched for other footprints, Mr. Ferret at length re-entered the house, and at the end of two hours had ingratiated himself so marvelously in the good graces of the servants, from the housekeeper down to the lowest scullion, that he knew nearly as much of the private history of each and every individual composing the household as did the persons themselves.

In the early twilight he passed into the grounds to walk and ruminante. The chambermaid had told him that the window of an anteroom, just beyond the chamber Colonel Falkner had occupied that fatal night, and looking out, like it, upon the veranda roof, had been found wide open the next morning, though she remembered having closed it herself just previous to retiring. He was revolving this fact in his mind, as he strolled down one of the dusky side paths, and vaguely wondering if, in spite of the tell-tale footprint, the culprit must not be one of Mrs. Falkner's own household.

Suddenly he stopped short and uttered a faint "Halloa!" The figure of a man gliding stealthily through the shrubbery, a short distance beyond the path, attracted his attention. Mr. Ferret stared at him, then rubbed his eyes and stared again, this time recognizing the stalwart, manly figure of Raymond Challoner!

"Humph!" the detective ejaculated to himself. "This means something. Mr. Challoner would not be stealing away in this fashion unless he had a secret to keep. I will follow, and, if I can, find out what it is."

CHAPTER IX.

EAVESDROPPING.

PASSING one thicket after another—all of which were passed in turn by the detective shadowing his footsteps—Raymond Challoner paused, at length, in an open glade near the avenue gates. Here stood a swarthy, Jewish-looking individual, leaning against a tree-trunk with the air of a man waiting for something or somebody.

"Here you are at last, shir," said the stranger, starting forward the instant his wandering gaze fell upon the figure of the young man. "You don't come a minute too soon, let me shay, for your own good."

"Hush!" Raymond exclaimed, in an angry voice. "I got your message; but I didn't come here to be threatened. What do you want?"

Mr. Ferret drew as near to the speakers as he dared, and crouching down behind a clump of evergreens, impatiently awaited the answer. It came speedily enough.

"What do I wantsh? It's of no use for you to be asking such questions, shir. You knowsh very well that I wantsh mine money."

"Fool! You shall have it, in due time; only be patient."

"I've waited and waited and waited, shir, but no good comesh of waiting," retorted the Jew, sullenly. "I must have mine moneysh."

"I told you that you should. Be reasonable, Levi."

"I can't be put off forever, shir; you knowsh I can't. Bishness is bishness, shir. Where is the nishe young lady with a bagful o' money you were going to marry?"

Raymond drew back with a muttered curse.

"And so you heard that the marriage had been put off, and that's what brought you down to Glenoaks in such haste?"

"Mine interests must be looked after, shir," was the dogged answer. "Theres a good deal at stake. You'd better tellsh me, fair and square, whether theresh to be marriage at all, or no."

"Of course theresh is to be a marriage. It has been delayed a few days by the sudden indisposition of Miss Erle. But it is to be celebrated in church, on Sunday morning."

"Shunday, and no mistakesh?"

"Yes."

"The day after to-morrow?"

"Yes: You have no need to question me so closely; I do not wish to deceive you."

An ugly chuckle came from the Jew's lips.

"It wouldn't be besht for you to try that game, shir, and I think you knowsh it. No man likesh to cut his own throat."

Raymond was trembling. "Come this way," he said, suddenly, in a husky voice. "I have more to say to you; and this thick shrubbery could easily afford shelter to eavesdroppers."

He drew his companion toward the middle of the open space, and their conversation was resumed in a lower tone—so low, in fact, that Mr. Ferret found himself unable to distinguish another word.

Ten minutes later they separated. The Jew went out at the gate, muttering discontentedly to himself, and Raymond Challoner hurried back to the house.

Mr. Ferret followed the latter. On the terrace steps, as they drew near, stood Mrs. Falkner, a lace shawl gathered over her shoulders. A pained, troubled look was on her face, which the fading light brought out distinctly.

Raymond walked straight up to her; and the detective, true to the instincts of his profession, fell behind, screening himself behind a convenient trellis.

"It is fortunate that I met you, Mrs. Falkner," said Raymond, speaking in an agitated voice. "I was on my way, at this very moment, to solicit an interview."

Mr. Ferret saw her turn, and look fixedly at the young man.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Challoner?" she asked.

"I wish to consult with you concerning my—my—marriage. Ethelind avoids me so persistently that I am unable even to exchange a word with her. Of course there will be no second delay?"

"The marriage is indefinitely postponed; I thought you so understood it."

Raymond gasped for breath.

"But I did not so understand it!" he cried, hotly. "And I cannot submit to unnecessary delay. The state of Ethelind's health can no longer be a plea for postponing it."

The events that have transpired in this house are sufficient excuse," Mrs. Falkner haughtily returned. "To me it seems wicked and unseemly to talk of marriage and merry-making when a shocking tragedy has been so imminent."

"You do not seem to consider my disappointment."

"Propriety must be observed."

"Propriety!" came the fierce response. "What care I for the empty forms of society when they separate me from the woman I love?"

"You have only to wait a reasonable length of time for the consummation of your happiness."

"I cannot wait! Oh, Mrs. Falkner, prove yourself my friend in this emergency, and do away with all delay."

"Impossible. I have consulted with my son, and he agrees with me that the marriage must be indefinitely postponed."

"Good God! Is Colonel Falkner also in league with those who seem determined to oppose me?"

"It is to this unseemly haste that he objects."

"I know," exclaimed the young man, writhing like one undergoing torture. "I have not been blind, all these weeks! Colonel Falkner's reasons for advocating delay are transparent enough. The murderous attack on himself has nothing to do with them. He hopes the marriage will be given up altogether, and then he can himself lay claim to the hand of his beautiful ward."

"Mr. Challoner, I am ashamed of you!" was Mrs. Falkner's indignant response.

She was turning away when he laid a restraining hand on her arm.

"Forgive me, Mrs. Falkner. I had no right to make such a remark. But, misery has driven me beside myself."

She drew herself haughtily aloof.

"Now that the subject has been broached, we may as well come to an understanding. At the first I favored your marriage with my son's ward, but I do so no longer. Ha! you not seen that Ethelind does not love you, and only accepted you in a moment of pique or jealous frenzy?"

"Love will come of itself, when she is once my wife."

"Not if her heart is given to another, and such is, I fear, the case."

"Humph! A romantic attachment, of which, a year hence, she will herself feel heartily ashamed."

"She certainly ought to be cured of her folly before binding herself to another," Mrs. Falkner coldly said. "Why, the mere thought of this marriage drives her to the verge of despair and insanity."

"She should have weighed all this before betrothing herself to me."

"True—true."

"I cannot release her from the engagement."

Mrs. Falkner gave her head a haughty toss. "And I, for my own part, cannot force the girl into a marriage so abhorrent to her feelings. You must plead your cause with her—not with me."

Hastily gathering up her shawl, she walked into the house, without another word. And after a brief delay Raymond Challoner followed her, his brow knitted, his lips compressed.

Mr. Ferret gave vent to a suppressed whistle when at length he emerged from his temporary hiding-place. A new theory in regard to the attempted murder was dimly penetrating his brain. In spite of Raymond's self-control, he had heard enough to feel convinced that the young man was insanely jealous of Colonel Falkner. Might he not be the guilty person? There was the open window in the anteroom to be accounted for. He might have stolen out at it for the purpose of misleading suspicion, and in his terror and agitation forgotten to close it on his return.

Two things, at least, were clear; first, that Raymond was jealous of Miss Erle's guardian; secondly, that he stood in pressing need of money, which he had looked to the contemplated marriage to supply—his intended bride being an heiress in her own right.

The footprint in the dust remained unaccounted for, by this theory, unless Raymond had descended the steps for the express purpose of throwing suspicion upon some outside party.

"The young man will bear watching," thought the detective. "He may know more of this mystery than anybody else."

An hour later he was sitting in his own room, thoughtfully pondering the subject, when a servant entered and said:

"My master has been told that you are in the house, sir; and he would like a moment's conversation with you."

Mr. Ferret rose with alacrity.

"Am I to go to him at once?"

"If you please, sir."

"Very well. You may precede me."

When he was ushered into the chamber where Colonel Falkner was lying, the sick man half-rose on his elbow, and looked at him earnestly.

"It was my mother—not me—who summoned you to Glenoaks, Mr. Ferret," he said.

"I am aware of that fact, Colonel Falkner."

"For my part, I would rather you had not come."

The detective manifested some surprise at the frank admission, and Colonel Falkner added, abruptly, after a pause:

"The affair was not serious enough to require an investigation. None should have been attempted."

"Mrs. Falkner thought differently."

A suppressed sigh broke from the colonel's lips. At length, fixing a still more intense gaze upon Mr. Ferret's face, as though he would have read his very thoughts, he said, in a low voice:

"I have a request to make—one with which I trust you will comply."

"It is only necessary to state it, sir."

"When you discover a positive clew to the mystery you were called here to unravel, will you come to me with the evidence before speaking of it to any third person?"

It was the detective's turn to stare, and he did, with all his eyes.

"You would not even except Mrs. Falkner?"

"I would except nobody," was the answer.

"Very well. I cannot refuse compliance with so simple a request."

"Thank you. This is a pledge between us, and I shall hold you to it. Now you may go."

Colonel Falkner dropped his head on the pillow with an expression of unmistakable relief. His eyes closed, but a spasm of physical or mental pain caused the firm lips to quiver, ever and anon.

"The mystery deepens," muttered Mr. Ferret, as he slowly picked his way back to his own room. "Colonel Falkner evidently wishes to shield somebody from public exposure. Who is it—Raymond Challoner or another?"

CHAPTER X.

THE TELLTALE SHRED OF CRAPE.

DETECTIVE FERRET began his investigations, the next morning, by again going over the veranda roof, and carefully observing every window opening upon it. Of these there were two besides those belonging to the anteroom, and to the chamber in which Colonel Falkner had slept that fatal night.

It would have been a comparatively easy matter for Raymond Challoner—or anybody else in the house—to steal out at one of the windows and in at another before engaging in the crime that had been attempted.

"The colonel's door was not fastened, they say—the assassin might have gone stalking into the chamber without let or hindrance," thought Mr. Ferret, as his keen gray eyes roved from side to side. "But my theory of the crime makes that fact of little consequence. The guilty person would naturally seek to cover up his tracks and avert suspicion; and every facility was here offered him. I'll investigate a little further, and then report to Colonel Falkner, as I promised."

In less than five minutes after giving utterance to this soliloquy, the detective made a fresh discovery—one that completely overturned all his preconceived ideas of the manner in which the attempted crime had been committed.

This discovery was nothing more nor less than the finding a scrap of white crape, of the kind commonly called Canton crape, clinging to a nail in the wooden casing of the window that opened into Colonel Falkner's chamber! The shutter had effectually concealed it when he made that first and more superficial examination, the day before.

Mr. Ferret took the bit of crape in his hands and looked at it attentively. It had evidently been torn from a shawl, for a single knot of fringe still adhered to it. His experienced eye told him at a glance that the texture could not have been exposed to the weather where he found it, many days.

Hurrying into the house, he asked for Mrs. Falkner, and was at once conducted to her sitting-room.

"Madam," he said, abruptly, "I have come to you for needed information. Is the veranda roof ever used as a place of resort by any of the women—servants or others—belonging to your household?"

She replied in the negative.

"Have any of them been on the roof since this miserable affair occurred?"

"To my knowledge—certainly not. None of them would be likely to go there."

Mr. Ferret now produced the scrap of crape.

"Be good enough to tell me, madam, if there is a shawl in the house from which this fragment may have been torn."

Mrs. Falkner bent to look, and a strange expression stole slowly over her face.

"Yes," she answered, in a faint voice.

"To whom does the shawl belong?"

"To my son's ward, Miss Ethelind Erle."

"Send for Miss Erle, if you please, and ask her to bring the shawl to this room."

Mrs. Falkner immediately rang the bell, and gave the necessary message to the servant who answered the summons. After a delay of about five minutes Ethelind entered, looking pale and anxious; but she brought nothing along.

"I know not where to find the shawl for which you asked. I have searched through my wardrobe, but it isn't there," said Ethelind, in a low voice, half turning away from the detective.

"How long is it since you first missed it?"

"Several days."

"Pray be more explicit," said Mr. Ferret, changing his position in order to get a better view of her face. "How many days?"

Her eyes drooped, but she made no reply.

"You had it on when you were let into the house the night of the storm," said Mrs. Falkner.

"Yes."

"And the night of the storm was the night of the attempted murder," thought Mr. Ferret, never suffering his intense gaze to leave the girl's face for a moment.

"The shawl must have slipped from my shoulders on the way to my own room," Ethelind said, after a pause. "I did not miss it that night, but I have not seen it since."

Mrs. Falkner approached the door.

"Remain here," she said, briefly. "The servants may know something of the missing wrap. I'm going to inquire."

Ethelind tottered to a chair and sat down, pale and faint. Fully quarter of an hour elapsed before Mrs. Falkner returned, but during all

this while she did not once speak to the detective, or glance toward him.

Mrs. Bates, the housekeeper, followed Mrs. Falkner in.

"Here is the shawl," said the latter, speaking in a raised voice, the instant they crossed the threshold. "It was found the morning subsequent to the storm."

"Where?" inquired the detective.

Mrs. Falkner waved her hand toward the housekeeper, and said:

"You may tell him."

"I picked it up on the lawn," said Mrs. Bates, stepping forward, and throwing the shawl over a chair.

Ethelind raised her head. Even Mr. Ferret seemed startled.

"On the lawn?" he echoed.

"Yes. It lay half-under a rose-bush at one end of the veranda.

"At which end?"

"The north—near those iron steps."

He stepped forward and turned the shawl round and round. From one side a small portion of the fabric had been torn away, leaving a ragged edge into which the fragment he held in his hand fitted perfectly.

While he stood staring at it, a cold hand fell on his. Ethelind stood beside him, every drop of blood gone out of her ghastly face.

"That is not my shawl," she said.

"Whose is it?"

"I cannot tell. I only know that it isn't mine."

"Were there two white crape shawls in the house?"

"No—only one."

"How, then, can you be sure this does not belong to you?"

Ethelind clasped her hands.

"It is difficult to explain in what way it is dissimilar, and yet I can detect a difference. Not in color, not in texture, not even in the depth and knotting of the fringe, but rather in the general appearance of the shawl. This is not mine," she repeated.

"I hope you may be able to prove it isn't."

"My shawl would be discolored—I had worn it out in the storm. There is nothing about this to show that it has ever been wet."

The detective could discover nothing. He turned to Mrs. Bates.

"What was the condition of this shawl, as to being wet or dry, when you found it?"

"It was dry, except the dampness it would naturally gather from lying on the grass, after a rain."

"And every fiber of mine was soaked with water when I came in out of the storm," said Ethelind, in a low voice.

Mr. Ferret knitted his brows. Was there ever a more aggravating case? He had shifted his theory of the crime once already—would he be compelled to do this a second time?

"Permit me to ask a question of another sort, Miss Erle," he said, at length, looking as if he would read her through and through. "Were you aware that Colonel Falkner would occupy the chamber he did that fatal night?"

"I was not," she answered, trembling slightly, and dropping her eyes.

"Until the alarm was given, you believed that Mr. Raymond Challoner had been sleeping there, as usual?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Falkner now stepped forward, and said, in an unsteady voice:

"The arrangement was decided on at a late hour of the evening, and I am quite sure nobody knew of the change save myself, the parties concerned, and one of the servants."

Mr. Ferret uttered an expressive "Humph! You may dismiss Miss Erle as soon as you please," he said to Mrs. Falkner, in an undertone, and then walked to the window.

When Ethelind had gone, he took up the question of the dagger that had been left sticking in the wound Colonel Falkner had received. Of course he had already informed himself that the weapon belonged in the house.

"Where was it usually kept?" he inquired.

"In a cabinet that stands in the room Miss Dolores Gloyne now occupies."

"Send for Miss Gloyne."

When Dolores made her appearance, the detective abruptly confronted her with the dagger, and the stern demand:

"When was the first time you ever saw this weapon, Miss Gloyne?"

She looked up with a startled glance, her face turning quite pale.

"The evening when the wedding was to have come off."

"Where was it?"

"In the cabinet of my chamber."

"What called your attention to it at that particular time?"

She hesitated, looking frightened and distressed, but Mrs. Falkner said, coldly:

"You must reply to his questions, Dolores."

"I was sitting in my room," replied the girl, trembling in every limb, as she spoke, "when Ethelind entered, looking very wild and strange. I think she was slightly delirious. She caught up the dagger, all of a sudden, and threatened her own life with it."

"She must have been in a desperate mood."

"She was."

"Humph! What could have occasioned it?"

"I think the proposed marriage was not to her liking."

"Did she retain the dagger in her possession?"

"No. I found it in the cabinet, the next day, and threw it out of the window."

"Why did you do that?" Mr. Ferret asked, in a surprised tone.

"I felt afraid that Ethelind might come across it again, when I was not present, and do herself mischief."

At this point, the detective attempted to catch Mrs. Falkner's eye, but she kept her face resolutely averted.

"Let the investigation be dropped for the present," she said, after a brief silence. "I am not well this morning. You can come to me again by and by."

With a sweep of her arm she dismissed both the detective and Dolores, closing and bolting the door behind them the instant they had gone out.

Raymond Challoner chanced to be crossing the hall. Mr. Ferret felt like running up to him and begging his pardon for the unjust suspicions he had entertained. But struggling against the impulse, he walked straight on to Colonel Falkner's room, and entered.

Fortunately the sick man was alone. Mr. Ferret approached the bed, saying, quietly:

"Here I am, sir, obedient to your request."

On the colonel's face came a look of pain and terror. He gasped once or twice as if his breath were gone.

"Well?" he said, faintly panting.

"I am certain that we both suspect the same person," sinking his voice to a whisper.

"That murderous blow was not intended for you, but for Raymond Challoner. You know, as well as I do, who is interested in putting him out of the way."

Colonel Falkner shuddered, and pressed his fingers over his eyes.

"Hush! I think you know how to keep a secret, Mr. Ferret. Now go down to the library, and make out a check to any amount that seems appropriate, and I will sign it."

"Very well. I understand you. You can trust me, sir—there shall be no scandal—none, at least of my making."

The interview began and ended with these few words. Mr. Ferret wrote out the check as directed, took it to the colonel, and it was signed without another sentence being spoken on either side.

An hour later the detective was descending the stairs with his light overcoat thrown over one arm, and a portmanteau swinging beside him, when Mrs. Falkner opened the door of her sitting-room and spoke his name.

"Will you please come in, Mr. Ferret?"

He entered. A strange expression had settled upon the woman's face that made her look years older than she had looked early that morning. She made no comment whatever upon his preparations for departure, however. Perhaps she was not even aware of them.

"I see now that it was a mistake to attempt an investigation of what has occurred," she said, speaking in cold, self-possessed tones. "I have decided to abandon it. Your labors here are at an end, but that shall make no difference with the liberality of the reward you have earned."

She was drawing a small writing-desk toward her, when Mr. Ferret took from his purse the check he had already received, and held it out for her inspection.

"Your son has forestalled you, madam. He has already paid and dismissed me."

She looked round with a suppressed cry.

"Then he knows—"

"All that you know, madam. But there is nothing to fear. I never yet betrayed a patron. Good-by!"

He put out his hand, and Mrs. Falkner dropped hers into it, sighing heavily. The next moment he was gone. —

CHAPTER XI.

A WOMAN'S DESPAIR.

THE investigation had begun, gone on, ended, and the mystery enshrouding the events of that memorable night remained as great an enigma as ever to Mrs. Falkner's servants, and the small fraction of the outside world that knew anything of the matter. The conviction prevailed that Detective Ferret had found the case too difficult to be worked up advantageously, and had voluntarily abandoned it—a belief that Mrs. Falkner and her son, whatever their own private opinions, took care to encourage.

But the good mistress of Glenoaks seemed a changed woman. She shut herself into her own apartments, shunning everybody. She even avoided the chamber in which her son was convalescing, as if shrinking from the sight of a human face, or the sound of a human voice.

Early in the afternoon of the second day of this self-imposed banishment, Ethelind knocked at the door of Mrs. Falkner's room. This sudden freak of the old lady's greatly perplexed and distressed the sympathetic girl, and she longed to hear some explanation of it.

When she entered, Mrs. Falkner was sitting near the open window, her head leaned wearily upon one hand, her deadly-pale face turned away. Her whole attitude was that of a person upon whom some terrible grief or trouble has fallen.

"You are ill—you are suffering!" Ethelind exclaimed, quickly crossing the floor.

Mrs. Falkner shivered, but she did not look up or speak.

"What can I do for you?"

"Nothing."

"But you have scarcely tasted food for two days. Dear madam, you are either sick, or in mental distress. In either case, I am anxious to help and befriend you."

"You!" cried Mrs. Falkner, with thrilling and bitter emphasis. "It would be like quenching fire with fire."

"Oh, what do you mean?"

"I won't tell you. Leave me! That is the only satisfactory thing you can do."

"I can't bear to be sent away. Do let me help you," said Ethelind, eagerly.

She bent down and would have kissed Mrs. Falkner's forehead had not the latter sprung back, uttering a hysterical cry, and beating her hands before her, as if beating her off.

"Don't touch me! You shall not! I beg of you to go away. You can do me no good."

She leaned against the window-frame, such an expression of horror and aversion on her face that Ethelind drew back, and after a moment's hesitation, left the room. In all her life she had never been so puzzled, so confounded.

Since the night of her lonely vigil, the girl had avoided the chamber in which Colonel Falkner lay; but now, in her distress and perplexity, she proceeded directly to it. No smile of welcome lighted up the sick man's face, however, as he observed her approach. It seemed, rather, to grow colder, harder, and more lividly white.

"Is it you, child?" he said, in a languid voice.

"What can I do for you?"

Ethelind's heart beat suffocatingly fast, but she tried to still it. Scarcely knowing what she did, she stepped forward and dropped her hot hand on the sick man's, which was lying on the pillow. He violently withdrew it, as if there had been contamination in her touch—

"Pray stand back," he exclaimed.

A livid grayness crept over Ethelind's features and they seemed to harden, all at once, into stone.

"Colonel Falkner," she said, in a dry, hard tone, "you shrink from me as if I were a leper, a thing accursed. Why is it?"

"I am nervous," he answered, composing himself with an effort. "I frankly acknowledge that I dislike to be touched. But surely you can look leniently upon the whims of a sick man?"

"You have been like this ever since that dreadful night."

"My illness dates from then."

"You make an effort to hide the truth, but you cannot deceive me. You would rather clasp the fingers of a corpse than mine."

He looked up pitifully, sorrowfully, into her pale face.

"Ethelind, I beg of you to cease. I hoped you had given up that fanciful notion forever."

"It is not fanciful!" she cried. "It would not hurt me so if it were. And now your mother treats me in the same inexplicable manner."

"My mother?"

"Yes. She turns away as if she had rather not even look at me. There must be a reason for this. Oh, do not put me off any longer. Tell me what it is!"

She clasped her hands and stood motionless, gazing at him in a beseeching way that touched his heart.

"My dear child, I beg of you to dismiss this foolish fancy," he said. "It only makes you unhappy. Believe me, my mother and I are the best friends you have in the world."

"You will not tell me what I wish to know?"

"How can I?"

"You are cruel! I shall not ask you again."

Uttering a passionate cry she turned away with a flushed cheek and a lurid sparkle in her eyes.

The afternoon was hot and sultry. Hurrying to her own room, Ethelind tied on her hat, and left the house. She felt as if she should stifle in its close atmosphere.

Thick masses of clouds were piled up in the sky, vailing the fervid sun. Some subtle magnetism drew Ethelind's feet to the sandy shore of the bay. Seating herself on a mossy rock, so low down that the curling tide caught, ever and anon, at the hem of her garments, she gave herself up to perplexed though idle conjecture. Her half-mad brain utterly refused to advance a reasonable explanation of the strange treatment she had recently experienced at the hands of Mrs. Falkner and her guardian.

The human mind is wonderfully complex in its workings, and in some unaccountable way the thought of Colonel Falkner's dead love soon began to mingle itself with her musings, and quite unconsciously she traced the name "Olympia" in the soft sand at her feet with her parasol-tip.

A step crashed on the shingle a few minutes later, and looking round with a gesture of impatience, Ethelind saw Raymond Challoner approaching.

It was the first time she had seen him alone since the interrupted wedding. In the house it had been a comparatively easy matter to shun him, and decline all overtures for a private interview. But here, in this secluded spot, there seemed to be no chance of escape. She half-rose, biting her lip till the blood came.

"At last!" the young man ejaculated, pressing eagerly to her side.

She expected to hear a torrent of wild words and bitter reproaches. To her intense surprise, there was deep silence for a moment. Raising her eyes, she saw that Raymond was staring at the name written in the sand with a very strange expression on his face.

"Olympia," he said, suddenly. "It is an unusual name."

She made no reply.

"Where have you heard it, Ethelind? Have you a friend who bears that singular appellation?"

"I have not."

"Why, then, did you write it there?"

"I do not know. Because it struck my fancy, perhaps. I can give you no better reason."

Raymond quietly seated himself on a second rock, at a little distance. Perhaps he was keeping a strong restraint upon himself. At any rate he looked little like a disappointed lover.

"The name is of no consequence, Ethelind. I wish to speak of quite another matter—in fact, followed you from the house for that very purpose."

"How dared you dog my steps?" she cried, angrily.

"It was an impudent thing to do. But you left me no choice. This interview might just as well have been held in the drawing-room at Glenoaks, had you so willed it."

She turned fiercely toward him.

"Now that you have forced your unwelcome presence upon me, pray tell me, in the fewest words possible, the nature of your wants," she said, in a raised voice.

"Ethelind, my love, this is singular language to hold toward your future husband."

"No matter; I can't disguise my real feelings, nor do I wish to disguise them."

"I believe you hate me."

"I never said I loved you," she cried, in a tone of violent, repressed excitement. "How could I, when it was never true?"

"But you promised to marry me," he answered, looking straight into her dilated eyes.

"Fool that I was! I deserved to be punished. And, oh, my God, have I not been?"

"The marriage has been twice delayed, but through no fault of mine. Of course you intend to keep your promise?"

She leaned toward him, writhing and clenching her slender little hands.

"Do you wish a wife who dreads your touch—who shivers at the sound of your voice—who stifles in the air you breathe—who always feels an irresistible impulse to fly from your very presence?"

"I cannot give you up," he said. "My love is stronger than your aversion. It will consume the weaker passion."

"Never!"

"You cannot hold out forever against me. It isn't in the nature of things."

He attempted to clasp her hand, but she drew herself suddenly away from him, a steely glint leaping up in her dilated eyes.

"You know what I suffer," she said, wildly. "All the trouble I have ever known has come to me through your instrumentality. Do you mean to curse my life still further? Do you intend to hold me to an engagement that I abhor—one that should never have been entered into?"

"Forgive me, Ethelind, I must. It is my only chance of happiness in this world. More depends upon our marriage than you are aware. Why shrink from what is inevitable? Even if I were to release you, you would gain nothing by my clemency. Two lives would be blighted instead of one. Under the circumstances it seems to me that I am justified in holding you to your promise."

"Oh, mercy, mercy! I believe you intend to break my heart! It is broken already!"

At this outburst Raymond arose, and again vainly essayed to take her hand, while he murmured in low, tender tones:

"Ethelind, for both our sakes I entreat you to look this matter squarely in the face. He, upon whom you have so foolishly lavished your affections, does not value them in the least."

"True!" she cried, a scarlet flush leaping like flame into her cheeks, only to recede the next moment, leaving them paler than before.

"He will never dream of making you his wife—never! You would wear out heart and life in vain. Colonel Falkner regards you with feelings of indifference, and he cannot change."

The livid lips parted, a low irrepressible moan breaking from them.

"Hush, oh, hush!"

"The truth is bitter, but you must learn to bear it. Your weakness has only awakened sentiments of contemptuous pity in the heart of him you love not wisely but too well. Oh, Ethelind, shake off the mad infatuation. Bring all your firmness to bear against it. Let it be my blessed privilege to help and strengthen you. This mad, hapless, deplorable passion can be conquered, and—"

He proceeded no further. The half-crazed girl stopped him with a wild gesture—a sudden sweep of the hand.

"Hush!" she slowly panted. "Don't you see that you are killing me with your cruel words? Oh, let me go!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE STRANGE LADY.

SPRINGING past him, Ethelind rushed wildly along the beach, and climbed the steep bank beyond. With her white, working face, and eyes strained in dead affright, she looked like a poor, lost, terror-stricken soul fleeing from the voice of doom.

Raymond did not attempt to follow. He stood, wholly impassive, looking after her retreating figure until it was lost to sight; then a heavy sigh broke from him.

"Poor Ethelind. I really pity the girl. But I cannot give her up. My love and my necessity alike forbid. The dower she will bring is sufficient to save me from financial ruin, and her sweetness, purity and goodness will be the means, perhaps, of saving my erring soul from hell!"

Biting his lips, and knitting his brows, he added, in a changed voice:

"I can't stave off those rascally Jews much longer. They are getting more importunate every day. Unless the marriage is hurried forward with all possible dispatch, I am a ruined man."

His handsome brows were deeply corrugated, and he stood grinding his boot-heel into the yielding sand, as if, even in this trifling action, he found a safety-valve for the intense emotions boiling within his soul.

A sudden peal of thunder aroused him. Looking up, he saw that the tempest was already marshaling its forces. The jagged clouds had piled themselves together until one vast pall, of inky blackness, covered the western heaven.

At the same instant he observed a woman's figure gliding along the sand, at some distance, with a slow, majestic tread. The figure held

his attention by a strange sort of magnetism. It was draped in black from head to foot, but its graceful poise and easy movements, even as seen through the intervening space, excited his curiosity and admiration.

"I wonder who she can be?" he muttered. "Ah, I have it. That black-draped lady is the new proprietor of Lorn!"

Of course the gossip and marvelous stories still current concerning Mrs. Faunce, had reached Raymond Challoner's ears as well as those of other people; and, had he been less deeply absorbed in his own affairs, at this particular period, he would have given them some share of attention, long ere this.

Singularly enough, that mysterious figure, the instant his gaze rested upon it, caused a strange commotion in his heart. He felt drawn forward by an impulse over which he had no control. There was an unaccountable creeping sensation in his veins.

"I must know more of that lady," he muttered. "Somehow I feel deeply reluctant to permit her to pass from my sight."

Yielding, without further resistance, to the spell that was on him, he hurried after the woman, and soon had the satisfaction of seeing her turn into an unfrequented path that led through a grove; for by this route the grounds of Lorn could be reached.

"I was right," he thought. "The lady is certainly Mrs. Faunce. She is closely veiled, and I am told that the new mistress of Lorn always goes abroad with her face shrouded."

Still keeping some distance behind that black, gliding figure, he followed on stealthily to a thicket of acacias, not more than a dozen yards from the house, and concealing himself therein, saw Mrs. Faunce climb the terrace steps to a low French window that stood open, and disappear between the curtains of creamy lace that were quivering in the breeze.

Baffled and perplexed, Raymond stood perfectly still for some moments.

"I would give my right hand for a good excuse to invade that mysterious abode," he muttered, peering curiously through the parted branches at the gray, frowning walls of Lorn.

Three minutes later the desire of his heart was gratified. There came a blinding flash, a long, loud, deafening roar of thunder, and suddenly the rain began to pour in torrent, as if the flood-gates of heaven had been opened.

"This is fortunate," cried the young man, exultantly. "The way is opened by Providence. If I were a dog, Mrs. Faunce could not refuse to shelter me from this storm."

Emerging from the shelter of the acacia trees, he ran across the lawn, and dashed through the identical window where he had seen the lady herself disappear.

The raging tempest would, he hoped, be accepted as a sufficient apology for this act of rudeness.

Mrs. Faunce stood near the center of the apartment, her shapely fingers busy with the fastenings of the veil that muffled her face.

Startled by the noise of his abrupt entrance, she turned quickly. For some seconds she stood motionless as a figure carved in stone. Then, receding from him, step by step, a long, loud, blood-curdling scream broke from her lips.

"Hush!" said Raymond, eagerly. "There is no occasion for alarm. Oh, pray dismiss your fears."

But Mrs. Faunce only shrieked the louder, and beat her hands before her as if beating him off.

"Listen to me, madam. I am neither a thief nor a cutthroat. I entreat you to compose yourself."

She continued to retreat until her limbs tottered under her, and, faint with excess of emotion, she sank down on a chair, groaning aloud.

Raymond could but feel surprised at the keenness of her terror. There was something unnatural in it; and as he fixed his eyes on the lady's figure, that seemed to shrink and cower beneath that intent gaze, the old creeping sensation he had experienced once before, came back, he knew not why.

"Permit me to offer an explanation," he said. "Surely you can control yourself long enough for that."

Mrs. Faunce fell back in her chair, and cried, in a hoarse, husky whisper:

"Go, go! Leave me!"

"One moment, madam. I must, at least, make an apology for this intrusion."

He was slowly advancing, but she screamed again, and, with a shudder of repulsion, waved him away.

"Be gone!"

"Madam is unreasonable. I have already

given my assurance that I am here with pacific purposes only. The sudden tempest induced me to seek the shelter of your roof. My name is Raymond Challoner, and I am stopping at Glenoaks, the guest of Colonel Falkner."

Another tremor ran over her, but she drew a deep breath, as of relief.

"Gol!" she faintly gasped.

"Would you send me out into the pelting storm?"

"You must not remain here. Only leave me."

Her voice still sounded hoarse and strained, but when she uttered these last words Raymond detected a ring in it that caused his eyes to dilate, and glued his feet to the floor in a sort of sickening terror.

"Who—who—speaks?" he stammered.

Before she could reply, if such had been her purpose, the room door abruptly opened, and Joan Withers entered hurriedly.

Seeing a stranger standing in her mistress's presence, the faithful old woman confronted him with a smothered exclamation of surprise, and a cry of anger.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "What are you doing here?"

Raymond drew himself up haughtily.

"You glare at me as if I were a criminal. But I have been guilty of nothing worse than to seek shelter from the storm."

"Go away," said Joan, grimly. "This is my lady's private sitting-room. You cannot remain here."

A suppressed cry now attracted the servant's attention to her mistress. Mrs. Faunce had crushed her veil over her face with both hands, and was faintly panting.

"Quick, Joan, quick! Raise me up. I—I am stifling."

The old woman flung her arms round her, and drew the trembling form to her bosom.

"This is your work," she said, darting an angry glance at Raymond.

Half-leading, half-dragging poor Mrs. Faunce. Joan succeeded in getting her into the next room—her sleeping apartment. Raymond would willingly have lent his assistance, but the servant disdainfully struck down his offered hand.

"Don't you dare lay so much as a finger on my mistress," she hissed.

The young man heard an odd sound like a gasp and a sob, and the door was slammed in his face, and fastened on the other side.

For some ten or fifteen minutes afterward there was a silence as of death. Raymond stood with hushed breathing, uncertain what had happened, whether Mrs. Faunce had swooned, or was dead, or had fallen in a fit. A feeling of awe stole over him. He even forgot to wonder what familiar chord had been struck by the tones that, for a moment, stirred him so deeply and so powerfully. He could only think of the possible catastrophe that had befallen.

At length a faint, rustling noise reached his ears, and, unable longer to endure the suspense, he knocked softly on the door. After some moments it was opened by Joan.

"What do you want?" she sharply demanded.

"Your mistress—tell me of her—is she better?"

"Yes. She has come out of her swoon, and will soon be able to sit up."

"Heaven be praised."

In his joy and relief, Raymond attempted to push Joan aside, and step into the room. But the woman sturdily resisted him. He caught an indistinct glimpse of a figure lying on the couch—saw some dark object, probably a veil, drawn up quickly, as if to shield Mrs. Faunce's features from his gaze—and that was all. Her face itself was beyond his line of vision.

"May I not speak to your mistress?" he said, wistfully.

Joan sullenly waved him away.

"Impossible."

"Only a word," he pleaded. "I wish to assure Mrs. Faunce how deeply I deplore my share in this occurrence."

"She is in no condition to receive your apologies."

"Then I will simply kiss her hand."

"You are an impudent fellow," Joan answered, looking daggers at him, and drawing the door against her back, as she stood in the threshold, nearly shutting it. "You have done mischief enough for once. Go away. The rain is over—you no longer have any excuse for remaining."

Glancing from the window, Raymond saw that she had spoken truly. The clouds were breaking up in piles of softest fleece, behind which smiling streaks of azure were already to be seen. Reluctantly, and with many a backward glance, he left the house.

"Why did that woman impress me so strangely?" he muttered to himself, as he wended his way through the dripping shrubbery. "Ugh! I'm all a-shiver! It was like meeting a denizen of another world. If I could see her face, perhaps the mystery would be explained. What can be her motive in concealing it from everybody, as she does?"

CHAPTER XIII.

TWO LETTERS.

DINGLE DELL, the pleasant and fertile estate of the Challoners, was situated about twenty miles inland, near the suburbs of a large manufacturing village called Grafton.

The mansion itself was a modern edifice of red sandstone, with innumerable balconies and verandas, and round towers that crowned every available angle. The windows were large, and those on the lower floor opened to the ground, giving to the house a cheerful, hospitable aspect that was pleasing in the extreme.

The mansion had been built by Mr. Egbert Challoner himself, while comparatively a young man. Here he had brought his bride, and from these spacious halls had he buried her. The poor lady, in dying, left two children, a son and a daughter, to the care of her bereaved husband—pledges of their mutual affection.

Years went on, and the boy and girl grew to maturity. Both turned out badly; for want, it may be, of a mother's guiding and restraining hand. The son quarreled with his father, and left home. For years afterward he was lost sight of entirely. When at last he did return, he came home to die. But he brought with him a lad of some five or six summers, his son, the fruit, he said, of a marriage he had contracted in the South. Of the boy's mother he never spoke, except to say that he had lost her. There was evidently some dark secret associated with the lady that he preferred keeping to himself.

He died, and the mystery remained unrevealed. But, with his latest breath he left the little Raymond to his father's guardianship, a sacred charge.

Meanwhile, the daughter's fate had also been decided, so far as this world is concerned.

At the age of seventeen she fell in love with her music-teacher, a handsome young Englishman, named Gloyne. Mr. Challoner, as soon as he learned the state of affairs, dismissed the young man, and peremptorily forbade his daughter ever to see or speak to him again. Willfully taking her fate in her own hands, however, Dolores Challoner eloped with her lover, and they were married in New York.

One dark, tempestuous night, a year later, she returned to Dingle Dell dressed in widow's weeds. Her husband had been suddenly stricken down with a malignant fever, and she had buried him alone.

For a time Mr. Challoner refused to see her. But she had been his favorite child, and when he learned that she had been bereaved, and had come to him destitute, his heart relented. There was a scene of reconciliation, followed by the most bitter self-upbraiding, and father and daughter were at peace with each other.

One week afterward, the little Dolores was born. The poor mother had barely strength enough to place her child in the arms of its grandfather; and then she closed her eyes, and so died.

Though already past the prime of life, Mr. Egbert Challoner thus found himself again left with two small children, a boy and a girl, as before, on his hands. Would the same untoward fate that had overtaken his own children pursue these poor innocents, their offspring?

He watched them anxiously, as the years waxed and waned. At twenty, Raymond was permitted to make the tour of Europe. Of certain acts of lawlessness and indiscretion of which the young man was guilty as soon as all restraint was removed, and as he began to mingle freely with the world, the solicitous grandfather saw prophetic indications that greatly troubled him. But Dolores, until she accidentally formed the acquaintance of Vincent Erle, was all his heart could desire, gentle, patient, loving and tractable. Though often harsh and stern in his treatment of her, he could not help lavishing upon the girl all the wealth of love he had given to her mother.

He stubbornly refused, however, to receive Vincent Erle as his granddaughter's future husband, giving as an excuse the idle habits and poverty of the young man.

It was against his authority in this respect that Dolores betrayed the first signs of incipient rebellion.

At this period there were two other members of Mr. Challoner's household to whom attention should be directed—a handsome Quadroon called Madam Zoe, who had been his housekeeper for many years; and a distant relative of the family, Miss Jerusha Martin, a maiden lady, familiarly known as "Aunt Jerry."

A month had elapsed since the events related in the preceding chapters, and for three weeks Dolores had been back in Dingle Dell with her grandfather, when, one day, the mail brought two letters that filled the old man with grief rage and consternation.

Aunt Jerry was sitting with him in the front drawing-room when the unwelcome letters arrived. A tall, bony, angular woman of forty-five was Aunt Jerry, with a face that might have been pretty at seventeen, but was now grim, yellow, unexpressive, and somewhat hard, withal.

The two letters lay side by side on the salver, just as the servant had brought them in, when Mr. Challoner took up the one that happened to be nearest and tore it open.

It proved to be an anonymous communication, warning him that, in spite of his prohibition, Dolores and Vincent still met in secret, and that letters were constantly passing between the lovers.

The old man was frantic. Starting out of his chair, he danced around the room almost speechless with rage.

"Oh, dear! oh—oh—oh!" he ejaculated, whirling round and round in his excitement. "This is too much!"

Aunt Jerry dropped the knitting with which she was employing herself, and ran toward him in alarm. She knew nothing of the letter.

"Egbert, what is the matter?" she exclaimed.

"Oh, I am so overcome."

"Is it a fainting-fit, or a dizziness, or a pain in your stomach, or—what is it?"

"I am so overcome," was all he could utter; and pausing in his gyrations, he dropped his head on her shoulder.

Aunt Jerry began to blush, and to bridle.

"La, Egbert," she stammered, "you—you shouldn't give way so entirely."

"Can't help it! Murder will out! I am miserable—too miserable to live."

"Don't, don't!"

"I tell you it is impossible to keep my feelings to myself."

"Hush! oh, do hush!" said Aunt Jerry, her cheeks blooming like a yellow rose.

"I shall burst if I do!" ejaculated the excited man.

"Then you needn't. Speak, if you must."

The spinster, with the air of a martyr, leaned heavily upon his arm, and waited with averted face, for the revelation he had expressed his inability to keep back.

It came in a form she had scarcely counted upon.

"Read that!" cried Mr. Challoner, thrusting the anonymous letter into her hand. "The idiots! The piling fools! They've driven me beside myself."

"Who? what?" gasped Aunt Jerry, looking round in dismay. "I—I—don't understand. Of whom are you speaking?"

"Of Dolores and that villain, Vincent Erle, of course. Read the letter, and you'll know all about it."

"Oh—oh!"

She sunk down on a chair, her hands shaking as if with palsy. It was some seconds before she could make out a single word of the letter. The disappointment that had come to her was bitter one.

"I wonder if it can be true?" she said, in a husky voice, after a long silence. She felt constrained to say something.

"True? Of course it's true. Why else should it be written there in black and white?"

"It's a nasty, mean business to be writing anonymous letters. I haven't much faith in them."

"Where's Dolores?" cried Mr. Challoner, suddenly recommencing his mad dance round the apartment. "Find her! Bring her here. She shall tell me to my face whether this one means anything, or whether it does not."

Not choosing to await Aunt Jerry's slow movements, however, he flung open the room door himself, and screamed down the hall for one of the maids to fetch her young lady in "double-quick" time.

A few minutes later Dolores came tripping down-stairs, and entered. The instant Mr. Challoner's irate glance fell upon the figure of the young girl, he stamped his foot, giving way to another burst of passion.

"You vixen! you ungrateful creature!" he

cried. "Is this all the reward I am to get for coddling you ever since you were born? Oh if, you were a boy, miss, I'd thrash you—thrash you within an inch of your life, do you hear?"

Dolores had grown accustomed to his storms, and did not mind them much; but this one seemed more serious than usual.

"What have I done to offend you, grandpapa?" she asked, in a trembling voice.

"Done! You've disobeyed me, miss—willfully disobeyed me; that's what you've done."

"In what way?"

"It's high time you were asking that. Oh, you deceitful little vixen!"

"Please tell me, grandpapa."

"Oh, you shall hear of your misdoings fast enough. Listen—then hide your head for shame! You've tried to hoodwink a trusting old man. But your treachery has been discovered, miss. You are found out, miss—cut short in your sinful career, miss."

Dolores clasped her hands, and looked appealingly at her grandfather.

"You shock—you distress me," she exclaimed.

"Then the shocking and distressing is mutual," thundered Mr. Challoner, bringing down his hand on the table near which he was standing. "You've amazed, horrified me! You've driven me to the verge of desperation. Hang it, I don't even know which end my head is hung on!"

"Oh, Dolores, how could you?" murmured Aunt Jerry, in a very faint voice.

"To think of being deceived by a chit of a girl!" gasped the old man.

"But, grandpapa—"

"Silence, miss. You can not palliate your offense. I trusted you, and you betrayed me. You knew very well in what estimation I held that villain, Erle! And yet you have been meeting him clandestinely, and writing letters to him, all these weeks."

"Shameful!" cried Aunt Jerry.

Dolores turned very pale, and sunk on her knees at the old man's feet.

"Grandpapa," she sobbed, "I am not so guilty as you have been led to think. I am not. I tell you truly that I have not seen Vincent Erle since that night at Glenoaks."

"But you've written to him?"

"Yes," she admitted, seeking to hide her face with both hands.

"And he has written to you?"

"Yes."

"Dreadful!" ejaculated Aunt Jerry.

"When did you receive the last letter from the scoundrel?" demanded Mr. Challoner.

"Yesterday."

"Oh, you viper! Where is the letter? Give it to me instantly."

"I cannot," was the low reply.

"Cannot! Why can't you, I'd like to know? Hand it over, miss."

"I have destroyed it."

The exasperated old man gave a snort of dismay.

"Oh, you expected to be found out, did you, miss, and took that way to secure yourself? I never heard of such misdoings, such duplicity."

"Never!" echoed Aunt Jerry, who always made it a point to agree with Mr. Challoner.

"You may tell me the purport of that letter, miss."

This demand caused Dolores to start up suddenly, and recede toward the door, her hands clasped tightly together again, her cheeks pallid with fear. The letter had really made an appointment for a meeting to take place that very evening, and was couched in such language that the poor girl had not dared disregard it.

"Do not ask me," she implored, "I cannot tell you. Indeed I cannot."

"Do you mean to say that you will not?"

Dolores was silent.

"I am not to be trifled with," stormed the angry man. "You've tried me once too often. Follow, if you dare, the footsteps of your misguided mother! I'll cut you off with a shilling! I'll drive you from my door! I'll leave you to slave—or rot in the poor-house! That's what I'll do!"

"And you will be serving her right," put in Aunt Jerry.

Poor Dolores answered nothing. She continued to recede toward the door, a pale look of pleading on her face; and suddenly, with a half-suppressed shriek of anguish, as if the scene had grown insupportable, rushed out.

Mr. Challoner sat down, gasping for breath. He felt deeply, terribly in earnest. It pained him unspeakably to think that his beautiful grand-daughter, of whom he had been so proud, had set her affections upon one so unworthy, as he deemed Vincent Erle.

"It shall never be," he cried; "Dolores shall not throw herself away. One disgrace of that sort is enough in a family."

To hide his agitation, he now took up the second letter, which had been lying neglected on the salver, and tore it open. Instead of pacifying him, however, this missive threw him into a greater rage, if possible, than the first.

It was from a Jew broker of New York, who wrote to demand immediate payment of a debt of three thousand dollars which, the writer claimed, Mr. Challoner's grandson, Raymond, had contracted.

The old gentleman could scarcely believe the evidence of his eyes. He rubbed them, looked again, and at last the storm broke out. If Raymond had been borrowing money of those rascally Jews, he might get clear of their clutches as best he could. Three thousand dollars! How, in the name of all that is wonderful, had the rascal managed to squander such a sum!

"He shall reap as he has sown," roared the choleric old gentleman. "I'll disinherit both him and Dolores. And may I be shot if I ever, so long as I live, take another ungrateful brat to bring up."

CHAPTER XIV.

GROPPING IN THE DARK.

The day had been dark and lowering, and night, as it closed in, brought no change in the weather. The rain fell in copious showers, slackening ever and anon, only to rally its wasted powers for a second deluge.

Aunt Jerry's room was in the same wing with the chamber occupied by Dolores. The amiable spinster retired about ten o'clock, and had fallen into what she termed her "beauty sleep" when the rattling of gravel against the window of the adjoining room rudely awakened her.

She started upright, giving her night-cap a vicious twitch.

"La, bless me! What's that?" was her mental ejaculation.

The sound came again—unmistakably the rattling of gravel as it struck in sharp contact with the glass. Immediately afterward there was a rustling in Dolores's room, and Aunt Jerry heard the door softly open and close, and stealthy footsteps gliding down the corridor.

Thought is quick, and the spinster's suspicions took a definite turn instantly.

"I see, I see!" she muttered, nodding her head. "It's that audacious girl stealing out to meet her lover. Oh, how can she be so forward? But it is my duty to put a stop to this sort of thing, and I'll do it, too."

Springing out of bed, Aunt Jerry hastily thrust her feet into the slippers that stood primly side by side, next to the wall. Then she threw on a flannel petticoat, and drew a shawl round her shoulders.

It was of no use trying to make a grand toilet, if Dolores was to be caught, she decided. The girl would get completely beyond her reach.

She went stalking down-stairs, and was just in time to catch a glimpse of a white-robed figure as it flitted through the low window at the end of the hall, and turned into a path leading to a small pavilion at some distance from the house.

"Oh, that's where Dolores meets that precious scamp, is it?" breathed the shocked spinster. "They imagine themselves perfectly safe in the pavilion, I suppose. How scandalous! My dear Egbert must be told of this, that he may exert his authority to prevent such audacious proceedings in future."

Aunt Jerry quite lost sight of her peculiar costume in the sudden zeal she felt to put Mr. Challoner on the track of the culprits. Proceeding to his room, which was on the ground floor, she knocked long and loudly.

"Who's there?" said a gruff voice, at length.

"It's me—Jerusha."

"What do you want?"

"Come right out, said Aunt Jerry, in an eager voice. "Dolores is in the garden with that scamp! I saw her steal forth to meet him not five minutes ago."

"Meet whom?"

"Vincent Erle."

Mr. Challoner was out of bed in an instant, and at the door, his yellow night-cap quite noticeable as he thrust out his head; for a dim light was always kept burning in this corridor. Aunt Jerry was reminded all at once of her own head-gear, and, snatching it off, threw it behind her, at the same time giving her false front a twitch into its proper place.

"Where did you say the idiots are?" Mr. Challoner demanded, hoarse with excitement.

"In the pavilion."

"Wait a minute. We will go down and surprise them. Oh, the villain! the abominable villain! I'll have him arrested for trespass I'll put a bullet through his heart. I'll—I'll—"

Unable, for very rage, to utter another word, the choleric old man shut the door, and proceeded to dress himself with all possible dispatch. In three minutes' time he was ready to join Aunt Jerry in the corridor.

"Come," he said, his tone not loud, but deep, as he dropped one hand firmly on the spinster's arm.

They crept silently through the window. The rain had ceased for a moment, but the night was dark—so dark that objects could not be distinguished at the distance of half a dozen yards. The damp wind blew in their faces, and every tree, shrub and blade of grass was dripping with moisture; indeed the very ground seemed soaked and overflowing with it.

They had not proceeded far before Aunt Jerry's flannel petticoat began flapping against her heels in a manner not altogether pleasant, for it seemed to have gathered up every particle of moisture from the path along which they had come. Suddenly she uttered a half-suppressed scream, and stood stock-still.

"What's the matter?" Mr. Challoner impatiently demanded.

"I've lost one of my slippers."

"Lost it?"

"Yes. It is stuck fast in the mud."

"Never mind. You had better come on. It's of no use searching for the slipper in this infernal gloom."

They proceeded. They were not a dozen steps further on the way, however, when a second cry issued from Aunt Jerry's lips.

"Mercy on me! There goes the other."

"Hang it all," cried the exasperated old man, "why can't you wear slippers that fit your feet, or else stuff 'em with cotton? We can't be wasting time here."

Poor Aunt Jerry might have told him that the slippers were all right, only she hadn't taken time to draw on her stockings, before putting them on; but it seemed scarcely modest to enter into an explanation of that nature, and she remained silent.

So they started again, and Aunt Jerry's feeble step.

"Beneath her petticoat,

Like little mice, peeped in and out."

as they went stumbling and plunging along the uneven ground—for somehow they had wandered from the path, and could not find it again. Once they plunged into a thorn-bush, and it took some minutes to extricate themselves. Mr. Challoner uttered anathemas, and the poor spinster, as she rubbed her smarting feet, heartily wished herself back in her own room, and the offending Dolores in— Well, in Africa!

Their trials were by no means ended. Aunt Jerry had stepped a few paces in advance of her companion, and was hurrying on more rapidly than at any previous time, when suddenly the solid ground seemed to give way under her feet, and she fell down, down, down, plunging up to her knees in an accumulated mass of mud and water.

"Mercy on me!" she gasped. "I might as well knock my brains out and done with it."

"It would take precious little knocking to do that."

"Oh, ugh!" shivered the wretched lady.

"What have I tumbled into now?"

"It must be the pit I ordered Sambo to dig that some of the refuse might be buried in it."

"Oh dear, oh dear; I wish I had never come."

"Don't be a fool!" snapped Mr. Challoner. "Here, give me your hand, and I'll help you out."

This was easier said than done; but after a deal of pulling, scrambling and splashing, Aunt Jerry stood on *terra firma* once more. "Thank fortune it is too dark for anybody to see the dreadful plight I'm in," thought the poor lady, only too vividly conscious of her mud-incased feet and dripping garments.

At this moment a few patterings drops of rain gave warning of another shower. Mr. Challoner became desperate. Grasping Aunt Jerry's hand he pushed his way recklessly through the shrubbery and reached the pavilion steps at length, quite out of breath and blowing like a porpoise.

The rain was pouring in torrents when the disconsolate couple dashed into the friendly shelter thus afforded. Shaking the water from his garments, Mr. Challoner looked round the dusky little room, and began to swear. Not a living soul, save themselves, was in the place, or had been, so far as he could discover.

"Idiot! how dared you bring me here, on a

tomfool's errand, like this?" he yelled, turning upon Aunt Jerry, and shaking her till her false teeth rattled. "Oh, you'll be the death of me."

"Ah!—ugh!—oh!" groaned the thoroughly disgusted spinster. "I know they are somewhere in the grounds. We've come to the wrong place, that's all."

"And I should think it was enough."

Fuming, fretful, fierce and furious, Mr. Challoner paced the floor of the pavilion, while poor Aunt Jerry crouched in one corner, her teeth chattering with cold and misery. It was bad enough, of itself, to be caught in such a plight, but "dear Egbert's" reproaches seemed the unkindest cut of all.

The rain lasted but a short time; Mr. Challoner and Aunt Jerry emerged from the pavilion as soon as it was over, and slowly and solemnly wended their way back to the house. Two dusky figures stood in the shadow of the veranda; but they separated hastily at the sound of footsteps, one of them darting into the gloomy recesses of the garden, the other vanishing through the open window.

Mr. Challoner swore, and Aunt Jerry groaned in spirit. But they were too wet, chilled and miserable for any action more decisive, and the culprits escaped.

CHAPTER XV.

ON THE VERGE OF DOOM.

THE morning subsequent to that night of calamity, Mr. Challoner was quite ill—confined to his room, though not to his bed. The fatigue and exposure he had undergone were too much for his enfeebled system.

A wretched night it had been! He had scarcely closed his eyes for thinking of Dolores, and the pain her willfulness and disobedience caused him. It seemed too aggravating that she should have met her lover secretly so soon after their conversation of the previous day.

The rain was over, and the morning sunshine poured in at the windows; but no cheerful thoughts were awakened in the old man's breast by its brilliant glow. He sat propped up in an invalid-chair, a dark look of trouble on his withered, yellow face.

At last he summoned Dolores to his presence. The girl entered, anxiety and dread plainly depicted in her countenance. She knew perfectly well that the interview to which she had been called would prove a trying one.

"Sit down," said Mr. Challoner, sternly motioning her to take the chair on the other side of the table.

Instead of obeying, she drew near, and, sinking at his feet, lifted her clasped hands and wistful eyes.

"You are angry with me, grandpapa," she sobbed, "and I prefer to remain here until pardon is accorded."

"Rise, miss."

"But you have not forgiven me."

"Forgiven you!" hissed the angry man. "Take care! If you have the presumption to ask for mercy, I am not so besotted as to grant it."

"But, grandpapa—"

"Rise!" he fiercely exclaimed; "and draw further away. Your touch is distasteful to me."

"One moment," said Dolores, her face growing lividly white, and her heartbeating furiously. "I have a confession to make. Let me make it here, at your feet."

"A confession?"

"Yes; it is wicked, sinful, to keep my secret longer. Whatever the consequences, I cannot consent to do it."

"Humph!" came the sneering response. "I suppose you are trying to invent a satisfactory excuse for your conduct of last night. Pray do not trouble yourself."

"You are mistaken," Dolores returned, in a low, trembling voice. "The indiscretion to which I am about to confess dates further back than that."

He bent upon her a puzzled look of surprise.

"Last night's act of disobedience is crime enough for which to answer, miss. How dared you meet that villain after all I had said to you? How dared you, miss?"

"My promise was already given. I could not break it."

"Your promise?" echoed the exasperated man. "What is it worth? A pledge given to a poltroon, a sneaking villain—it was better broken than kept."

"Hush, grandpapa!" said Dolores, with a flush of sudden energy. "Even you must not apply such epithets to Vincent Erle in my presence."

"Why must I not, I beg to ask?" sneered Mr. Challoner.

"Because he is my husband!"

Had a bombshell suddenly exploded at his feet, Mr. Egbert Challoner could not have been more startled, more confounded. He leaned forward, with bated breath, staring at the girl half incredulously.

"What?" he gasped.

Dolores repeated the words. A ghastly hue overspread the man's face as he gathered in their meaning.

"You are trifling with me," he said, with a faint, forced laugh.

"No, grandpapa, I am telling the simple truth. That is why I met Vincent last night. He is my husband, and therefore his authority over me exceeds even your own."

At this instant a suppressed groan came from the direction of the door. Aunt Jerry stood there with uplifted hands, her mouth and eyes wide open, drinking in every word.

"Shocking!" ejaculated the spinster. "Audacious! What is this generation coming to? A stolen marriage! Oh, dear!"

Mr. Challoner held her back with a sweep of his arm.

"Remain where you are," he said, his white lips trembling. "I wish you to hear what this abandoned girl has to say for herself."

"The shameless creature!"

"When did this marriage, to which you so boldly confess, transpire?" he demanded, fixing his eyes sternly upon the face of the kneeling girl.

"Oh, do not speak so coldly, grandpapa!" she pleaded.

"Answer my question."

"We were married last Christmas. I spent the day with a friend in New York, you will perhaps remember. Other guests were in the house, and soon after dark I stole away quietly for an hour, and met Vincent at a clergyman's house, where the ceremony was performed."

She controlled herself to speak calmly, but she felt faint and sick with suspense and misery. Mr. Challoner's features seemed to harden into stone as he listened.

"What induced you to consent to a secret marriage?" he asked, after a pause, in a low, ominous monotone.

"It was a foolish, wicked step," sobbed the poor girl. "I felt it so even then. But I could not resist Vincent's entreaties, and my own heart pleaded for him strongly. We believed you would forgive us, eventually, and were only waiting for some signs of relenting in your feelings toward Vincent to declare our marriage."

"Why have you declared it now?"

"Because conscience accuses me, and I cannot feel reconciled to keep the secret another hour."

Mr. Challoner fell back, wiping the cold perspiration from his forehead.

"I might have known how it would result," he muttered. "Like mother, like child. This one was certain to come to the same evil end as the other."

"Grandpapa, say that you forgive me," entreated Dolores, lifting her pale, pleading face. "Now that it is too late, I bitterly repent of my disobedience, and wish I had waited for your sanction to bless my marriage. For my sake, conquer your prejudice, and receive Vincent as your friend."

"Never—never!" cried the old man, springing to his feet, and looking down at the girl with blazing eyes. "I will never forgive you or him for the base deception that has been practiced! Not a dollar of my wealth shall go to enrich you or that scoundrel—that adventurer. I'll make a new will—I'll cut you off with a shilling. Now leave the room. Go, before I am tempted to curse you. I do not forbid you the house—as yet! I prefer to take a little time in which to consider your case."

Tremblingly Dolores arose, for the storm of wrath she had evoked frightened and appalled her. Receding to the door, she tottered past the amazed Aunt Jerry, glad to make her escape.

Mr. Challoner sat down again. His countenance was ghastly as death itself could have made it. A man of strong prejudices, he was at least honest in all his convictions, and the pain at his heart, just then, was the keenest he had ever experienced.

Whether his estimate of Vincent Erle was just or otherwise, he could not help clinging to it tenaciously. Far rather would he have consigned his loved granddaughter to the grave, than given her to the protection of such a man.

While he sat there pale, silent, suffering, a

shadow suddenly intercepted the light from the window, and a man's tall figure stepped over the sill. It was his grandson, Raymond Challoner, but at the first glance the old gentleman scarcely recognized him, he looked so worn, haggard and miserable. For some seconds not a word was uttered, but the two looked at each other in silence.

"Are you not going to welcome me?" Raymond said at length.

The young man was advancing eagerly, when Mr. Challoner put up his hand.

"Why do you come now?" he inquired.

"Permit me to fasten the door, and I will answer you. I prefer to keep this visit a secret. I left my horse in a grove down yonder, and approached the house on foot. It is fortunate that I found you here, and alone."

Mr. Challoner sat staring at the young man in a bewildered way while the latter slipped the bolts into their sockets, and drew down the shades over the windows.

"What has happened?" he gasped, at length. "Are you a hunted criminal, that you are compelled to resort to such precautions?"

"It isn't quite so bad as that," Raymond answered, with a bitter laugh. "But the good Lord only knows how soon it may be."

"What have you been doing?"

"Selling myself to the Jews, body, soul and spirit, that's all."

He threw himself into a chair, a strange frown upon his face, and sat glaring at his grandfather.

"I know," said the latter, gruffly. "One of your creditors had the impudence to write to me."

"Did he? That's not at all strange. The rascal! They are on my track at this moment. They'll stop at nothing, now, until they get their money. I have put them off with promises so many times that they no longer believe in them."

Mr. Challoner grew cold as he listened. That agitating interview with Dolores had left him in no condition to cope with a second trouble. It seemed too bitter, that disgrace and shame should be brought upon him by both his grandchildren! His soul sickened, his heart very nearly stood still.

"What do you want?" he asked, in a faint voice.

"Help, of course."

"I can do nothing. You had no business to involve yourself so deeply."

"One must live," was the sullen answer. "I have always looked forward to coming into the half of the Challoner property. It did not seem necessary, with such expectations, to deny myself the comforts of life."

"Comforts!" echoed Mr. Challoner, in a haughty tone. "I have always given you a handsome allowance—more than enough to gratify every reasonable want. And now, according to your own confession, you have exceeded it, plunging yourself deeply into debt."

"Over head and ears, sir. It will take no light sum to relieve me, some thousands at the least."

"You expect me to advance the money?"

"It is the only way in which exposure can be averted."

"How did you contrive to involve yourself so deeply?"

Raymond dropped his head.

"Oh, it is not necessary that you should answer. I can guess the secret. You lost your money at play, sir; at the gaming-table."

"I do not deny it, sir."

"You have promised me over and over again to give up the vice. I believed you had done so."

Raymond trembled as he looked into his grandfather's cold, stern face. There was something ominous in the old man's calmness and self-restraint. It seemed like the lull that often comes before a tempest. He would much sooner have seen him angry and furious.

"I intended to keep my word, sir, I did indeed," he said. "But one is surrounded with so many temptations in a large city."

Mr. Challoner made no reply, and after a brief silence, the young man drew near, and added earnestly:

"I am ruined unless you help me tide over this crisis. Rumors of my embarrassed affairs will certainly go abroad unless something is done immediately. That is why I came to Dingle Dell so secretly—the truth must be kept from the public, at least until after my marriage."

Mr. Challoner's lip curled.

"Does Miss Erle know aught of your troubles and perplexities?" he asked.

"No; I would not tell her for worlds. It would furnish her with the very excuse she wants for breaking off the marriage."

"Humph. It scarcely seems the course of an honorable man, to conceal the fact of his embarrassment from the lady he expects to make his wife."

"Circumstances compel me to take this course. Ethelind need never be told. When we are married, I am resolved to turn over a new leaf. I'll throw cards and dice to the dogs. Help me out of this infernal mess, and you shall see that I can keep my word for once."

"I have helped you once or twice before."

"True. But I have made up my mind. I promise to reform in good earnest, this time. Try me, sir. I came here on purpose to make this secret appeal. No one—not even Dolores—must know of this visit. She might suspect something, and think it her duty to warn Ethelind against me. Oh, sir, do not betray me."

There was another silence. At length Raymond said, uneasily:

"I've done my best to tide this danger over. I left Glenoaks, some three weeks since, and went up to New York, hoping to succeed in staving off matters a little longer. But it was of no use. Unless you interpose, disgrace is inevitable."

Had Raymond come to his grandfather at any other time, it is probable his plea would not have been made in vain. But Mr. Challoner's mood was a very bitter one. First, Dolores had disappointed him, and now it was Raymond. He almost felt like cursing them both.

"Let me hear no more of this matter," he said, in a low, stern voice, his eyes burning with a strange expression. "If you have disgraced yourself, you did it in your sober senses. I have given your dupe long enough; now, I wash my hands of you and your affairs. You have brought sorrow and shame enough upon my head. Now, I disown, discard you. From this time forth I have no grandson."

Raymond slowly rose to his feet, a strange, ashy pallor overspreading his countenance, though it had seemed as white as it well could be, before.

"You—you—you are—in earnest?" he gasped.

"You shall see. Two years ago I made a will, dividing my property equally between you and Dolores. But the girl, too, has disappointed me. It is not right that ingrates should benefit by my death. You have evoked your own punishment. I have resolved to make a new will, and leave all my possessions to found a hospital."

Before Raymond could interpose, the old man had slipped back the bolts of the door, and touched the hand-bell on the table.

"One of the servants will be here directly," he said, in a low, impressive tone. "If you still desire to keep this visit a secret, you can retire to my bath-room, yonder. By keeping the door ajar, you will be enabled to hear the instructions I shall give to the servant."

Raymond gasped once or twice, and then, scarcely knowing what he did, staggered into the bath-room, just in season to avoid being seen by the person who entered the apartment he had just left.

It was Madam Zoe, the housekeeper. The woman's handsome face flushed, and she sent a quick, furtive glance in the direction of the half-closed door behind which Raymond stood curving and trembling, ere she said:

"What is your pleasure, Mr. Challoner?"

"You may send one of the men-servants for my solicitor—Lawyer Grab. I have need of his services professionally, and he is to come without delay."

The woman's strange black eyes dwelt for a moment fiercely on his face.

"Is that all?" she said, turning at length to go.

"It is."

"I will see that your wish is executed."

Scarcely had she disappeared and closed the door, ere Raymond emerged from his hiding-place. His very lips were white.

"I hope you have fully considered the step you propose to take?" he said, in a husky voice.

Mr. Challoner silently pointed to the window. Something in his face told the young man that he had nothing to hope or expect from expostulation. A strange chill stole up from his feet to the crown of his head as he turned slowly away, and stepped out into the bright, glaring sunlight. He felt that his doom was sealed.

CHAPTER XVI. A DEED OF HORROR.

SELECTING the most densely-shaded among the garden-paths—for he still had discretion enough left to try to shun observation—Raymond hurried on feverishly until he reached the pavilion. Here he paused, climbed the steps, and threw himself prostrate on one of the benches, groan after groan breaking from his livid lips.

At length he heard the rustle of a woman's dress, and a cold, soft hand fell on his. He raised his head—it was Madam Zoe's.

"Why have you followed me here?" he asked, suddenly.

"Because I knew you were in trouble. Dear master, do not drive me away—and oh, don't look at me like that! Perhaps I can help you."

"No one can help me, now," came the despairing answer.

"My poor, poor boy."

"Do you know aught of my trouble, Madam Zoe?"

"I know every thing," she replied, in a gloomy tone. "I saw you come stealing toward the house like a criminal, and my heart told me something was amiss. I listened at the door."

"You heard all that my grandfather said to me?"

"All," said the woman.

Raymond sat up and folded his hands; all was darkness and despair.

"I am a ruined man," he groaned.

"Don't say that!" cried Madam Zoe, in a fierce, thrilling whisper. "Mr. Challoner has no right to cast you off for a mere youthful folly. It is unjust. If he does it, some fearful retribution will surely overtake him."

The young man did not answer; he sat with his black eyes fixed intently on the floor.

Madam Zoe sternly continued:

"You have a right to half these broad acres. They would have been your father's, had he lived. They must not be taken from you. I shall tell Mr. Challoner so."

"And be driven away, as I have been? No, you must not incur the risk, Madam Zoe."

"Do you think I could remain if you were banished? No: the place would become odious to me. I could not even breathe freely under a roof that had denied shelter to you."

Raymond shuddered as he listened to the woman's words, spoken as they were with a strong, wild vehemence. She had always seemed to cling to him with a deep, self-sacrificing affection. He could not understand it. He never had.

"You are the only friend I have left at Dingle Dell," he said, softly.

"I shall never fail you," returned Madam Zoe, dropping her hand caressingly on his shoulder.

"Why is it that you have become so strongly attached to me?"

She changed color, and fixed a wild, startled look on the young man's face.

"It is well to have something to love," she muttered. "Ask me no more. There are magnetic influences always at work, where there are human hearts; and of some of these you, as yet, know nothing."

She turned slowly and left the pavilion as she spoke, and after a few moments Raymond followed her out. His face wore a dark, gloomy expression as he disappeared in the thick shrubbery with which this portion of the grounds was planted.

The sober hues of twilight were darkening the landscape when at last Lawyer Grab, the solicitor for whom Mr. Challoner had sent arrived at Dingle Dell. The messenger had not found him in; and now he had hurried over, the moment he found himself at liberty, to learn what his client wanted.

Mr. Challoner stated his wishes in a few terse words.

"I want a new will drawn up, and the old one destroyed."

"You do?" said the lawyer. "What's the reason of this?"

"My grandchildren have shamefully deceived and betrayed me. It is my intention to punish them. I shall leave my money to found a charitable institution."

Mr. Grab stared at him uneasily.

"That would be unjust," said he. "You will do nothing of the sort."

"Who is to hinder me?"

"Of course you can do as you please with your own. But my advice is that you think twice—half a dozen times, if necessary—before taking such a step."

"What business is it of yours?"

"None, to be sure. But I don't wish to see you drawn into a measure, in the heat of passion, that you are likely to regret."

The old man frowned.

"Will you draw up the will—or must I send for another solicitor?" he asked, with dogged sullenness.

"Of course I must do your bidding, whatever that may be."

"Then enough has been said."

"But it is too late to do anything to-night. In the morning I will come to you, at any hour you may name, with the proper papers."

"Very well. Let us say ten o'clock."

And with this understanding the lawyer took his departure.

It happened that Aunt Jerry was superintending some work in the kitchen that evening, and sat up till a later hour than usual. The clock struck eleven as she stood before the glass in her own room, deftly tying a starched and frilled cap under her chin.

"La, bless me! I had no idea it was so late," ejaculated the spinster, whirling round so quickly that she knocked the candle off the table, and was left in total darkness.

As her toilet for the night was nearly completed, Aunt Jerry decided not to relight the candle; but she stepped to the window and drew back the curtains to let in the light of the moon, which was sailing through a cloudless sky.

A moving figure on the lawn instantly attracted her attention, and as she pressed her face against the glass and peered out eagerly, a second figure emerged from the shadow of the house, and joined the first.

"Good gracious! It's Dolores and that rascal, Vincent Erle!" ejaculated Aunt Jerry, recognizing the two figures at a glance, for though the moon was not much past its first quarter, it already afforded considerable light.

"Audacious! I never did hear of anything so impudent! How dare they begin their billing and cooing over again, after what transpired this morning?"

Aunt Jerry clung to the window-sill and stared after the young couple until a bend in the path concealed them from view. She was choking with rage, but in the present instance no temptation to expose them to Mr. Challoner assailed her mind. She had had quite enough of that sort of thing the night before.

"Let them go," she muttered. "If Dolores told the truth they are husband and wife, and it is too late to interfere. They want to talk over this new crotchet of Mr. Challoner's, I reckon. Anyhow, I'm not going to ruin any more petticoats chasing after the ungrateful idiots. It's a marvel that I'm not sick abed with rheumatism, after getting the drenching I did last night."

The curtain slipped from Aunt Jerry's bonny fingers, and she went grumbling to bed, where she found transient forgetfulness of all her troubles in sleep.

Some time afterward—how long a time she could not tell—she was suddenly awakened by a hoarse, shrill cry sounding from the room immediately underneath—that usually occupied by Mr. Challoner himself.

Trembling with horror, Aunt Jerry started up in bed. Again the shriek came pealing up the stairway; this time it sounded more prolonged, and she distinguished a word that sent every drop of blood backward to her heart.

"Mur—der!"

Then came a muffled noise as if a fierce and deadly struggle was going on.

Aunt Jerry sprung out of bed, sweating with terror. She was not a brave woman, but she quite lost sight of self in the intense excitement of the moment.

Hurriedly throwing on a loose wrapper, she opened the door and stepped outside. As she did so, some one brushed past her on the landing with a faint, moaning sigh. It was a woman's figure—whose she could not distinguish in the gloom.

Hastening down-stairs, she found that the light which was usually kept burning near Mr. Challoner's door, had been put out, and that the door was widely ajar. She entered. The blinds were up, and one of the windows stood open, and a flood of moonlight poured into the room.

A faint, gasping cry sounded almost at her feet, and looking down, the appalled woman saw Egbert Challoner lying on the floor in one of the patches of moonlight, weltering in his own blood! A dark stream that oozed from his breast was already lapping its noiseless course over the carpet.

Screaming with horror, Aunt Jerry sprung forward, knelt beside the prostrate figure, and

supported the old man's head against her shoulder. The light of the moon fell full upon his face. He still breathed, but the death-pang had so contorted his livid features that they were ghastly to look upon.

"Look up! speak to me!" cried Aunt Jerry. "Tell me who has done this dreadful deed!"

As if the departing spirit had been recalled by that wild entreaty, his glazing eyes opened wide and white for a single instant, and a name fell from his quivering lips.

"Vincent Erle!"

Then he fell back a dead weight in her arms, and ceased to breathe.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DAY'S REVELATIONS.

The whole household soon came flocking to the scene of the tragedy, for such among them as had not heard the first appalling cries were awakened by the piercing screams that broke from Aunt Jerry's lips when she realized the terrible fact that she was actually supporting a dead man in her arms.

Gently placing the gray head on the floor, she walked up and down the room, still shrieking at the top of her voice, and wringing her hands.

"Oh—oh—oh! This is too dreadful! I would have died willingly if that could have saved him. But his murderer shall be punished! I can do that much—I can avenge him!"

There was something strangely grotesque and horrible in the woman's appearance as she roamed the floor and gave utterance to these ravings. Her face was deadly pale, and there was an insane glitter in her eyes. Her nightcap, which she had forgotten to remove, had fallen half off her head, and a few locks of scanty gray hair, escaping from under it, fell in straggling masses over the faded yellow wrapper she had drawn on.

Aunt Jerry had had her romantic dreams, and had cherished them just as fondly as a girl of sixteen. She had made an ideal hero out of the stern, self-willed old man, investing him with graces and merits he had never possessed. It seemed to change her whole nature to see him lying there, weltering in his own blood, struck down by the hand of an assassin. Her features took on a hard, fierce, vindictive expression quite new to them, and when some of the weeping servants drew near, and would have borne the body to the bed, she waved them fiercely back.

"Do not touch him," she said, in a raised voice. "Let some one go for the coroner. There is work to be done, for the murderer shall be brought to justice."

She bent down and laid her bony hand on the dead man's forehead. She was shivering, but no tears came to relieve the burning of her eyes.

"Poor Egbert! poor, martyred hero!" she muttered. "I loved you better than you knew. Now I will prove it by avenging your dreadful death."

Dolores Gloyne was one of the last persons to make her appearance, but at this moment she came gliding into the room. A wail of anguish broke from her lips as she bent over the dead body of her grandfather.

"Oh, Aunt Jerry," she moaned, "can nothing be done?"

"Ay, justice!" answered the woman, in a strange, hollow voice.

Dolores drew back with a dreadful sickness at her heart. She was frightened at the wild glare of reproach and horror with which Aunt Jerry regarded her.

"Why do you look at me so strangely?" she said. "Have you discovered any clew to the murderer?"

"Yes."

"Oh, my God! Who was it?"

The grayness of death overspread the woman's pallid face. Bending down suddenly, she whispered a few husky words in the girl's ear.

"Vincent Erle is the guilty man."

The eyes of Dolores dilated with despair and horror. Gasping once or twice, as if her breath were gone, she threw up her hands, and with an odd sound, half-sob, half-scream, fell senseless to the floor.

No gleam of pity crossed Aunt Jerry's stern face. "Take her away," she said, with a sweep of her hand toward the unconscious girl. "And see that she is not permitted to come here again."

The servants, greatly wondering at the singular scene, raised their young mistress between

them, and she was conveyed to her own apartment.

The coroner arrived shortly after daybreak, and with him came several men from the village who had been hastily gathered up to act as jurymen.

The body was examined—the premises carefully inspected. Appearances indicated that Mr. Challoner was in bed, and probably sleeping when the attack had been made. There were two or three ugly gashes in his side, and his hands were cut. The probable theory was that the first blow, being awkwardly dealt, had only awakened him, and that he had instantly sprung out of bed and grappled with the murderer.

The worst wound, that which proved fatal, had been received in the left breast, and the knife with which it was made was found lying on the grass, just outside the open window. The knife appeared to be a new one, and bore no marks by which it could be traced to its owner.

Twelve o'clock had struck before the coroner succeeded in amassing sufficient evidence to begin the examination of witnesses. The first person called was the village surgeon. This was a mere matter of form, as he could only testify to what was palpable enough already—namely, that the deceased had met with his death from the wound in question.

The servant who had last seen his master alive, was then called. He testified to having been dismissed by his master at half-past nine. Mr. Challoner was then ready for bed—he invariably retired early. The windows—of which there were two, both opening to the ground—were closed; but the servant could not say whether they were fastened or not.

"Call Miss Gloyne," said the coroner, when the servant had been given permission to retire.

Dolores entered, leaning upon the arm of Lawrence Grab, who had been one of the very first persons summoned. The beautiful girl was pale as death, and trembled with terror, as she sat down in the chair indicated by the coroner.

"Please state to the jury what you know of this shocking crime," said that gentleman, looking at her rather sternly.

"I know nothing," said Dolores, trembling more than ever, and dropping her eyes.

"Did you hear no roar in the night?"

"I was awakened by the screams of Aunt Jerry Martin; I heard nothing else."

"Did you arise immediately?"

"No. I felt dazed and frightened at first, for I had been sleeping very soundly. But when the screams continued, I sprung up and dressed myself."

"Did you learn what had happened before coming down-stairs?"

"I did. One of the maids stopped me on the landing, and told me that my grandfather had been murdered," Dolores answered, breaking into a passion of tears and sobs.

She was given time to recover herself, and then the coroner resumed:

"You say you were sleeping soundly. Is there any particular reason why you were buried in so deep a slumber?"

"I—I—had been up very late," answered Dolores, in a hesitating way.

"What kept you up?"

She did not answer, but a burning blush swept up to the roots of her hair, and receding, left her paler than before.

"Is it not a fact," said the coroner, sternly, "that you had an appointment to meet a certain young gentleman in the grounds, last evening, and were with him there until a very late hour?"

The head of Dolores drooped lower and lower. She seemed overwhelmed with shame and confusion.

"Yes," she answered.

"And was not that gentleman Mr. Vincent Erle?"

She shuddered, but made no reply.

"Answer my question if you please, witness."

"Yes," she said, in a low, trembling voice, "it was Mr. Erle."

"I thought so. Now you may stand aside for the present. Let the boy, Muggins, be called."

Muggins was a lad of twelve or fourteen, who was kept to run errands, and do any odd jobs about the place that might fall in his way. He had a precociously old, and a precociously wise expression not altogether pleasant to see in one of his age.

"Muggins," said the coroner, "you may tell the jury whether Miss Gloyne did or did not send you on an errand yesterday."

"She did," said the boy, grinning from ear to

ear. "Sent me to the 'Crown and Thistle' with a letter. Gave me a dollar for taking it, and promising to hold my tongue."

"To whom did you deliver the letter?"

"To Mr. Erle, sir. He was stopping there—lying low to keep out of master's way, I reckon. The letter was for him."

"For Mr. Erle, you mean?"

"I do, sir."

Nothing further was wanted of Muggins, and the coroner requested that Madam Zoe, the housekeeper, might be summoned.

"Can't be did, sir," said Muggins, speaking up from the corner to which he had retired, near the door. "She isn't here."

"Not here?" was the amazed reply. "What do you mean?"

"She's vanished, sir—evaporated. Nobody has the least idea what has become of her."

An inquiry into the matter elicited the fact that Madam Zoe had not been seen by any member of the household since the previous evening. She had suddenly and mysteriously disappeared in the nighttime, taking none of her belongings, and leaving no clew by which her flight could be traced.

The coroner seemed puzzled by this singular event. After whispering for some moments with the jury, however, he asked that Lawyer Grab be called to the stand.

The solicitor simply testified to having been summoned, by the deceased, the afternoon of the preceding day, for the purpose of drawing up a new will; and that the business, because of the lateness of the hour, had been finally deferred until ten o'clock of the present day.

"Is the old will still in existence?" inquired the coroner.

"It is," was the answer. "I have it in my possession."

"What is its purport?"

"After some trifling legacies are paid, the bulk of the deceased's large fortune is to be divided equally between his grandchildren, Raymond Challoner and Dolores Gloyne."

"Do you know if the deceased had made up his mind to leave his property differently?"

He had," replied the solicitor, speaking with extreme reluctance. "It was his intention to disinherit both Raymond and Dolores."

"What reason did he assign for so radical a change in his purposes?"

"He declared himself disappointed in the young people, and averse to the idea of allowing them to profit by his death."

A murmur ran the rounds of the jury. A motive for the crime had been disclosed by Lawyer Grab's testimony. Knowing nothing of the truth—except such facts as had already come out at the inquest—they looked at each other and whispered that Raymond and Dolores were the persons most interested in the old man's death. But which—if either—of the young people was guilty?

The coroner, who was better posted, shook his head at them gravely, and said in a low, impressive voice:

"Miss Gloyne may take the stand again."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE RESULT OF THE INQUEST.

TREMBLING with apprehension, Dolores again seated herself in the vacated chair at the right of the coroner. Ever since reviving from the swoon into which she had been thrown by Aunt Jerry's fierce denunciation of her lover, she had been on the rack of suspense. Was there any foundation for the woman's fearful accusation—and would it be repeated here, in the presence of the coroner and jury? Would the admissions she herself might be compelled to make be used as evidence against him?

No wonder her heart beat heavy and thick with fear as she once more took the stand. Her peace of mind, happiness and good name depended upon the turn the examination should now take.

The coroner's first words were not of a reassuring nature. Looking at her with steady scrutiny, he said:

"Miss Gloyne, I believe you have already acknowledged that you held an interview with Mr. Vincent Erle in these grounds, last night. At what hour did you meet him?"

"It was eleven o'clock, sir," Dolores answered, in an unsteady voice, without raising her eyes from the floor.

"When did you separate?"

"Shortly before midnight."

"Are you sure, witness, that it was before twelve, and not later?"

"I am. I heard the clock strike soon after returning to my chamber."

"Where did Mr. Erle go when he left you?"
 "I think he left the grounds."
 "Have you any means of knowing whether he actually did go away or not?"
 "No, sir."

The coroner made a note in a little book he had held in his hand throughout the inquest, and then said briskly:

"Witness, you may state to the jury, if you please, when you last saw Mr. Erle previous to the meeting to which attention has just been called."

Dolores started, clasped her hands convulsively, but she made no reply.

"Witness, we are waiting," said the coroner.

"I saw him the night before last," Dolores answered, in a scarcely audible voice.

"Did you meet him in the grounds on that occasion, also?"

"I did."

"It was a secret meeting, of course?"
 The heart-sick girl could only bow her head.

"Your grandfather was hostile to the young man in question, and had forbidden you to see him?"

"Yes, sir."

"A rumor has reached my ears that you were secretly married to this Mr. Erle, some months ago. Is it correct?"

Again the girl's head drooped in acknowledgment.

"When did the marriage take place?"

"The twenty-fifth of last December."

"You may state to the jury whether news of this marriage ever reached the ears of the deceased."

"Yes," said Dolores, speaking quite huskily; "I confessed it to him myself."

"When?"

"During an interview I held with him yesterday morning."

"Ah!" said the coroner, making another note in his book. "And was it not in consequence of that confession that the deceased decided to drop your name from his will?"

"It may have been," Dolores replied, growing paler and more terrified as the examination progressed.

"And did you not immediately write a note and send it by the boy Muggins, to Mr. Erle, at the 'Crown and Thistle,' telling him what had transpired, and appointing the meeting that took place last night; and was not all this done that you might discuss with the young man the unexpected emergency that had arisen?"

The coroner had drawn considerably on his imagination in putting this leading question, but the look of terror that came on the hapless girl's face, and the shrinking shiver that ran all through her frame, evinced the shrewdness of the guess he had made. He would have continued the inquiry, but Dolores suddenly fell back in a half-fainting condition, and he was compelled to forbear.

All this while Aunt Jerry had been sitting in the darkest corner of the room, quietly biding her time. When at length her name was called she came forward with a quick, firm step. The few eventful hours of that morning seemed to have aged her as many years.

"Your name is Jerry Martin, I believe?" said the coroner, when she had been sworn.

"Not Jerry, your honor, but Jerusha. Sometimes I am called Jerry, for short."

"Yes, yes, I understand all that. How old are you, madam?"

"How old?" echoed Aunt Jerry, changing her hard, dry tone for a hysterical one. "I don't see that the question of my age concerns anybody but myself."

"But the question is often asked in cases like this, and it is one you are bound to answer."

"But I say I won't!" cried Aunt Jerry, very red in the face.

"And I say you must, or it will be our duty to commit you."

She gave a gasp of dismay. She had but a vague idea what the word "commit" could mean in the sense in which the coroner used it; but of course it was something dreadful.

"Must I really tell all those jurymen how old I am?" she asked.

"Certainly."

"Oh, dear! I never dreamed of such a thing. Well, I—I-am past thirty."

"How much past thirty?" said the coroner, trying to repress a smile. "It is necessary to be explicit in these matters."

Aunt Jerry hung her head, and replied that she might be nearer forty, after all.

"Put it down fifty, and have done with it," said one of the jury.

"Fifty!" shrieked the scandalized woman.

turning upon him, indignantly. "Oh, you brutal I'm not a day over forty-five, and you know it."

When Aunt Jerry had grown calmer the real business proceeded. She was asked by the jury to state what she knew of the murder, and proceeded to give her evidence as follows:

"Sally and I had the preserves to do over yesterday, and the work kept us up so late that it was nigh onto eleven before the last jar was put away, and I went up-stairs to bed. I had only a candle with me, and somehow that got overturned and went out. I was nearly undressed at the time, so, instead of lighting another, I just drew up the blind to let in the light of the moon."

"Yes, yes. Go on, witness. When you drew up the shade, what did you see in the garden below?"

"I saw Dolores descend the terrace in the direction of the shrubbery, where a man met her."

"Did you recognize that man?"

"I did. It was Vincent Erle."

Aunt Jerry then proceeded to state that she had gone directly to bed, and had slept until she was awakened by a scream and the cry of murder coming from Mr. Challoner's bedroom. Hurrying down-stairs, she had discovered the deceased lying on the floor, gasping his last.

"Did you speak to him?" asked the coroner.

"Yes, I entreated him to tell me who had done the dreadful deed."

"And did he reply?"

"He did," Aunt Jerry answered, amid the dead silence of the court.

"Who did he say had murdered him?"

"Vincent Erle."

A piercing shriek was heard as that name fell in fierce, vindictive accents from the woman's lips.

Lawyer Grab saw that Dolores was wavering in her chair, and sprung forward just in time to support her. For a second time that day the hapless girl had fainted.

There was no further evidence to be taken. The fact that a woman's figure had brushed past Aunt Jerry on the landing, came out, incidentally, but no great importance was attached to this circumstance. Every female in the house denied having been in the corridor at that particular hour, and the hasty conclusion was drawn that Aunt Jerry must have seen Madam Zoe, who was even then on her way from the house, and who, up to the present hour, had so mysteriously absented herself.

The coroner charged the jury, and after a very brief deliberation a verdict was brought to the effect that the deceased, Egbert Challoner, had met with death at the hands of Vincent Erle, the reputed husband of his granddaughter, Dolores Gloyne.

Of course measures were at once taken to secure the arrest of Vincent. Inquiries being made at the "Crown and Thistle," it was discovered that the young man had settled his bill and called for his horse, about ten o'clock of the previous evening, since which time nothing whatever had been known of his movements.

Glenoaks seemed the next place at which he was most likely to be found, and officers, armed with the proper warrant, were immediately sent thither.

Early in the day messengers had been dispatched to New York, where Raymond Challoner was supposed to be. No one save Egbert Challoner himself and Madam Zoo had known of the young man's secret visit to Dingle Dell, and now that death had closed the lips of the one, and the other had secreted herself so cunningly, that even the sharp-witted officers of the law could find no clew to her hiding-place, the fact of that visit, and the circumstances connected therewith, were not at all likely to come to light.

However, being the nearest male relative, and one of the heirs-at-law, of course Raymond's presence at the house of death and crime was both necessary and desirable.

And so, in gloom and horror, closed the first episode of domestic life at Dingle Dell.

CHAPTER XIX.

BACK TO GLENOAKS.

About five o'clock of the morning that succeeded that dark night of crime and horror, old Phillis, one of the house-servants at Glenoaks, was in the act of raking out the kitchen fire, when there came a low but imperative knocking at the door.

"Bress mo! Who can be a-comin' at dis time ob de morning?" ejaculated the old woman, starting up so quickly that she overturned her

basket of kindlings, and also a kettle of clear water standing beside it. "It ain't decent, not to say Christianlike, to be poundin' at folks's doors so airly. 'Deed it ain't!"

Still grumbling, Phillis stepped to the door and undid the fastenings. The instant her gaze fell on the figure standing outside, however, she drew back with a muttered exclamation of surprise.

"Good Lor'! Am it you, Massa Wincent? It wouldn't hab startled me more had I seen a real live ghost! So it wouldn't."

Vincent Erle—for it was he—stumbled past her, and sunk down on a chair, pale, breathless, exhausted.

"Bring me a glass of wine, Phillis," said he. "I'm tired out. Couldn't have done another mile to save me."

The old woman hurried to the sideboard in the dining-room, and brought out a decanter and a glass. She felt a little startled. This was the first time Vincent had made his appearance at Glenoaks since the interrupted wedding—more than a month before. Making use of one pretext and another, he had prolonged his stay in New York until the present time.

"What's de matter, Massa Wincent?" said Phillis, looking at him earnestly as she drew up a round stand and placed the wine on it. "'Pears like dis am a queer time o' day for you to be a-comin' home."

"So it is. But don't bother me, Phillis, that's a good soul. I'm too weary even to talk. I have been in the saddle most of the time since midnight."

"Good Lor'! You don't mean to tell me as how you came all de way from New York on horseback?"

"Certainly not. I left New York Monday morning, and—and have been visiting some friends in the country," the young man answered, looking restless and uneasy. "But we will talk about that some other time. Is my room ready for me?"

"It's allus ready, Massa Wincent. 'Pears you hab no occasion to be axin' dat ar'. Don't I look to it myself?"

"Then I will go up-stairs at once. It is not necessary to disturb any one else."

He arose, and was moving with a heavy step toward an inner door when he paused to ask:

"Phillis, is my sister well? And how is Colonel Falkner convalescing?"

The woman gave an expressive grunt.

"De kurnel am as good as new ag'in, Massa Wincent. His wounds hab healed up bootiful, and no mistake. As for poor Miss Ethelind, I don't know what to make ob de chile. Nobody does, for dat matter. Poor lamb!"

Vincent looked round quickly.

"You don't mean to say that my sister is ill?"

"I'll tell you my 'pinion, since you've axed for it, Massa Wincent," said Phillis, drawing nearer, and sinking her voice to a whisper. "I spects do chile's heart jess broke—dat's all. She's neber been de same since dat weddin'-night. She jess keeps her room, and mopes, and pines away. Tells you what, somebody 'll hab to answer for it if dey kills her between 'em, and dat's 'cisely what dey's doin'!"

"Whom do you mean by 'they'?"

"Furst and foremost, I mean Massa Raymond Challoner," answered the servant, in an indignant tone. "De young debble won't release Miss Ethelind from her promise to marry him, nobow; and anybody, wid any wit at all, can see dat de poor chile would rather be in her grave, than gib herself to him."

Vincent bit his lip. He had always looked with secret disfavor on the contemplated marriage; but he did not choose to express himself in the servant's hearing.

"Who else, Phillis?"

"Why, den dere's missis. Don't see what hab come ober dat woman. 'Pears like she can't bear to hab Miss Ethelind come nigh her, any more. She's rare unkind, and dat ain't my missis's nat'r'l state—'deed it ain't. I don't know what to make ob sick goings on."

Vincent himself looked troubled and puzzled. He felt that the servant, in her womanly sympathy for Ethelind, must have exaggerated the case. But even this conviction left room for unpleasant conjecture.

"Den dere's de kurnel—I mean, Massa Falkner," added Phillis, again dropping her voice. "He hardly ebber speaks a kind word to do chile, though he knows as well as I do dat she's breakin' her heart for him, and a-pinin' to a shadder—"

"Hush!" sternly interrupted Vincent. "It does not become you to speak of these things, Phillis."

"Good Lor'! I'd bu'st if I had to keep dem all to myself," muttered the woman.

However, the rebuke had the effect of silencing her, save that she still shook her head and grumbled to herself as she proceeded to arrange and light the fire.

Vincent passed through the hall, and was wearily climbing the stairs, when his quick ear caught the rustle of a woman's dress, and he became aware that some one was moving, with a slow and measured tread, up and down one of the corridors branching off from the main landing.

Feeling a sudden intuition as to whose that gliding figure must be, he stole after it, and near the large oriel window at the extreme end of the passage was confronted by his sister.

He drew back astonished, four weeks had wrought such a change in her appearance. Her face wore a haggard, nervous expression, her lips had lost their exquisite tinting, her smooth cheeks their rounded perfection. She seemed to have aged years in the month's brief space.

She wore a neatly-slitting black silk, with a lace collar and cuffs. A cluster of drooping and faded flowers was in her hair; and Vincent instantly surmised, as he looked at her, that she had not been in bed at all that night.

"Oh, Ethelind!" he exclaimed, half involuntarily. "My poor sister!"

She leaned her head on her brother's shoulder, and burst into a passionate fit of weeping.

"Vincent—you here! You don't know how you surprised and startled me. But I am glad you came—so glad!"

A little shiver ran over her, but she clung to him with hysterical violence; and after a little, raised her head, softly kissing his cheek.

"You are fearfully altered," he said, when she had grown a little calmer. "Why is it? Do you dread that marriage so very much? Never fear, darling. It shall never come off, never. I, your brother, tell you so. If Raymond persists in claiming you, I'll call him out! I'd do anything to save you."

"Dear, good Vincent! I know you would."

"Cheer up, darling," he whispered. "It will all come right some time. If Raymond comes again, I will see him myself. You shall not be driven into your grave by that man's persecutions."

She tried to smile, and then suddenly shut her eyes and shuddered.

"I wish I was dead, and out of my misery," she cried, in the fierce, sullen accents of despair.

"Hush, dear. You mustn't give way," he said, still trying to comfort her. "I am going to help you; and I want you to help me in return—that is what brought me home again."

"To—help—you?" she slowly echoed.

"Yes. Don't look so startled. I've been hiding a secret from you, all these months, and now it has involved me in a world of trouble. But I trust you to help me out of it."

"Is it money that you want?"

His face flushed crimson. Ethelind's willing hand had helped him out of more than one mortifying predicament, and she was ready to extend it again.

"I wish you had it all—every dollar," she burst out. "It has never done me any good, and never will. Oh, why was not the money left to you in the first place? I'm sure it rightfully belonged to you—men have so much greater need of riches."

"Yes," he said, in a low voice, "I do need money, but that is not all. I want your advice and sympathy. Ethelind, I am married!"

She gave a low gasp of dismay, and stared at him half incredulously.

"Married!"

"Hush. Not so loud! I was married last Christmas. I should have told you all this long ago, only it did not seem right to involve you in every act of folly I might commit."

She divined the truth at once.

"How strange it seems. But of course it is my dear friend Dolores—"

"Yes, it is Dolores I have married. And now old Mr. Challoner has discovered our secret, and is very angry. He will probably turn my poor bride from his door. Something must be done, Ethelind. We will talk it all over, by and by, when we are both calmer. I rely entirely upon you. I know you will not fail me. God bless you, darling!"

Strangely agitated, he kissed her severally times, very tenderly for him, and turning abruptly, at length, left her and proceeded to his own room, where he threw himself wearily on the bed.

During the entire day he emerged for only a few moments, and then only because of the necessity of paying his duty to Mrs. Falkner and

the colonel. Each interview was of the briefest. He felt too moody and miserable to protract them. Ethelind he did not see again that day.

Some strange spell seemed to have settled upon the household. Even the few moments he spent with Mrs. Falkner and his guardian were enough to cause Vincent to feel its influence. Colonel Falkner appeared thoughtful and absent-minded, and the proud old lady looked as if bowed down with shame and secret trouble.

All the old good-humor and cheerful hospitality that had rendered the family circle such a charming one were gone—he knew not why or wherefore.

"There is nothing but trouble in the world," thought the young man; "trouble and heartache. I wish, sometimes, that I was done with it."

The following morning he went down to breakfast at the usual hour. But nobody else appeared, and after waiting a long time, he was compelled to partake of the meal alone.

Just as he had finished, the woman, Phillis, looked in.

"Dar's a man at the door, Marsa Wincent—two ob dem, for dat matter," she said. "And dey is axin' for you."

"For me?" echoed Vincent, rising hastily. "What can they want?"

"Dey didn't say, marsa, only it's sussin' very particular."

Vincent hurried out, and was confronted in the hall by two strangers in the garb of policemen. They stepped up quickly the instant he appeared, and dropped a detaining hand upon either arm; and one of them said:

"Mr. Vincent Erle, you are my prisoner!"

CHAPTER XX.

ARRESTED.

VINCENT stared in blank amazement at the man who had spoken.

"What did you say?" he stammered, not taking in the full meaning of the words, or at least pretending not to have done so. "Your prisoner?"

"Yes, sir. You need not look so incredulous, my fine jail-bird; here is the warrant for your arrest."

Vincent made an effort to look at the paper the officer held before his eyes; but it was of no use. The words seemed to blur and run together.

"Upon what charge am I arrested?" he inquired, trying to calm herself.

"That of murder."

"Murder!" gasped Vincent. "Why, man, you are crazy."

The officer looked at his fellow with a detestable wink.

"Come, come! That won't do," he said, impatiently. "Of course you would feign ignorance. They always do—don't they, Bill?"

"Allus, sir," answered the policeman.

"It is some absurd mistake, I do assure you. Why, I do not even know who has been murdered."

It was perfectly true that no rumor of the dreadful crime had, as yet, penetrated to Glen-oaks, though nearly thirty-six hours had elapsed since its commission. The distance between the two places, some twenty miles, and the secluded situation of each, sufficiently accounts for this fact.

The officer, however, chose to look incredulous.

"If you would read the warrant, sir, it would save us a deal of trouble. It says, in so many words, that you are charged with having assassinated Egbert Challoner, of Dingle Dell, near Grafton."

Vincent gasped for breath, and turned a horror-stricken countenance upon the two men.

"Good God!" he gasped, with blanched lips. "Egbert Challoner dead?—murdered? It seems incredible."

"It is only too true, sir, as you are likely to find out to your cost."

"Oh, just Heaven! You do not mean to tell me that it is of his murder that I am accused?"

"Yes. And you must come along with us to answer for the crime."

Up to this moment, old Phillis had stood near the dining-room door, her ebony face gray with terror, her eyes almost starting from their sockets; but when the officers made a movement to take their prisoner away, she uttered a shrill, prolonged shriek that might almost have wakened the dead in their graves.

"You ole debbles!" she screamed, confront-

ing the men. "You mean, mis'rable trash, to come here and boddier decent folks like Marsa Wincent. You are nuslin' but murderers yourselves. Off wid you! Cl'ar out."

Vincent tried to pacify her, but it was of no use. Her screams, cries, and indignant ejaculations soon brought the whole household to the spot, Ethelind among the rest.

"Oh, Vincent, what is it?" the startled girl exclaimed, coming quickly forward. "What do these men want?"

He looked frightened and bewildered.

"It is nothing, Ethelind—a ridiculous mistake—that's all. Go back to your room. Colonel Falkner," he added, turning to that gentleman, who had just entered, "pray lead my sister away."

But Ethelind refused to go.

"I know that something dreadful has happened," she panted, with ashy lips. "Oh, tell me the worst at once!"

He turned aside his face and groaned; and it was Phillis who blurted out the fearful truth between broken ejaculations of anger and misery.

Ethelind was quite calm. She turned frighteningly pale, and a smothered sob broke from her lips. That was all.

"Must you go with these men, Vincent?" she said, in a low, shivering voice.

"Yes."

"Is there no way of avoiding it? Will they not take bail for your security?"

"My poor sister, this is one of the cases in which money is of no avail. And if it were, these officers are not the persons to whom application should be made."

Ethelind sat down on a chair, as if she felt sick and faint. But her voice was steadier than before when she turned to Phillis, and said presently:

"Go up-stairs for my bonnet and shawl."

Colonel Falkner heard the words, and came quickly to her side, an expression of disapproval on his pale face.

"My poor child, what would you do?" he said.

"I am going with my brother."

"No, you must not. I cannot permit you to take such a step. You can do Vincent no good. He will, I suppose, be taken before a magistrate, and an examination held. It is not befitting that you should witness such a scene."

Ethelind coldly averted her face.

"My presence will give him courage," she said. "He will know that he is not utterly forsaken."

"Mad girl!" ejaculated Mrs. Falkner, looking at her half in pity, half in anger.

"Do not seek to dissuade me," came the passionate appeal. "I cannot forsake my brother in the hour of his greatest need. You have no right to ask it."

"Let her go," said Mrs. Falkner, speaking in an undertone to her son. "Why should we seek to detain her? Are we not hopelessly disgraced already?"

Gathering up her breakfast shawl of black lace, the proud old lady moved down the hall, with a haughty step, and disappeared.

"Perhaps it is natural that you should wish to accompany your brother, Ethelind," said Colonel Falkner, looking pained and troubled. "But have you fully considered the ordeal through which you must pass?"

"Fearful as it may be, it is nothing in comparison with what Vincent himself must suffer."

A sigh broke from his lips as he looked into her convulsed and ghastly face.

"May Heaven support and strengthen you, poor child. I shall not make your trouble any greater by useless opposition."

In a few minutes they were ready to set out. A close carriage stood before the door, and Ethelind was kindly permitted to occupy the back seat with her brother. The loud wails to which Phillis gave way were the last sounds that reached her ears as the carriage rolled down the drive.

It was mid-afternoon when they reached Grafton. Vincent was taken directly to the prison, and locked into one of the cells, for safe-keeping. The examination would not be held until the next morning, the warden told him, but he was to be treated as if fully committed already.

About half an hour later, Vincent was sitting on the side of the cot with Ethelind's hand clasped in his, recounting, in a low voice, the story of his rash marriage, when a key turned in the lock, and a lady, closely veiled, was ushered into the cell.

"Dolores!" he cried, recognizing her at a glance.

The hapless young wife tottered forward, and sunk sobbing into his arms.

"Oh, Vincent!" she panted. "It seems too dreadful that we should meet again here—like this!"

"God bless you! You have not forsaken me—I am content."

"Forsaken you! Oh, my poor love, I have been praying for you every moment since I knew that those men had gone to arrest you."

She put her arm round his neck, and laid her cheek close to his; but she looked as if her heart were well-nigh broken.

Vincent held her fast for a moment.

"How good, how generous of you to come to me so soon!" he said in a broken voice.

"I did not lose a moment after I had reason to suppose you were here."

"Answer me this, Dolores," he said, drawing quickly away, and looking at her with a keen, searching gaze. "Before another word passes between us, tell me if you believe me guilty of the crime of which I am accused."

"Guilty!" she shivered. "No, no, no! Never for one moment have I doubted you."

"The circumstances are against me."

"No matter. I would stake my very life upon your innocence. You murder my poor, helpless grandfather! You could never have done it."

"No," he said, in a raised voice, as he strained her to his heart. "I have been wild, thoughtless, and a little reckless sometimes. But, God be thanked, my hands were never yet stained with crime!"

Even Ethelind was impressed by his earnestness.

If there had been a lurking doubt in her mind it was now dismissed forever; and she mingled her tears with those of the sorely-tried husband and wife.

When Dolores rose to depart, Ethelind accompanied her, and they spent that first bitter night of Vincent's imprisonment together.

The examination began about nine o'clock, the next morning, and lasted until noon. Ethelind was surprised, when she entered the justice-room, in company with her brother and Dolores, to see Colonel Falkner sitting near the bench. He had scarcely left the house since his convalescence, and she had not supposed him capable of undertaking such a journey. The girl fel her heart beat furiously as she met his gaze. A look singularly blended of pain and rapture flitted over her pallid face.

"It was very kind of you to come, Colonel Falkner," she said in a low voice, bending toward him.

"I could not bear to think that you were here alone, Ethelind," he answered.

"Alone?" she echoed. "I have my brother and Dolores."

"True. But they cannot give you the watchful care you need in the present condition of your health."

"You would make me out a greater invalid than I really am," she said, proudly; nevertheless her heart thrilled at the thought that it was solicitude for her welfare that had caused him to undertake the journey.

"I know you are incapable of taking proper care of yourself," he answered, gravely.

A bitter retort was on her lips, but the proceedings were opened, at this moment, and she suppressed it.

The evidence given at the examination was merely a repetition of that which came out at the inquest, and need not be dwelt upon again. No new facts of any consequence had come to light. Aunt Jerry was still the most damaging witness against the prisoner; and there was an awful look of horror, hatred and repulsion in the woman's eyes as she sat glaring at him from the witness-box.

Nothing had been heard of Madam Zoe, and her mysterious disappearance remained as great a marvel as ever. But those who shrewdly conjectured that the strange woman, could she be found, might "a tale unfold."

Quite a commotion occurred near the close of the proceedings. It was occasioned by the sudden appearance of Raymond Challoner, pale and travel-stained, at the door of the justice-room. Even the magistrate himself unbent from his dignity and signed for the young man to approach the bench.

"Have you just arrived, Mr. Challoner?" he asked.

"Yes," Raymond answered, with a low bow. "I was absent, in Washington, on a little mat-

ter of business, when the messenger sent to New York reached my lodgings. Of course he telegraphed to me immediately; and I set out, post-haste, to return."

The magistrate shook hands with him as a mark of respect and sympathy.

"This is a sad affair, Mr. Challoner."

"Very. I can scarcely believe in its reality."

"Have you any testimony to offer the court?" "None whatever," the young man answered, with a look of surprise. "Indeed, I have heard very little about the case, as yet, save the one shocking fact that my poor grandfather has been murdered."

Some one arose, at this juncture, and offered Raymond his seat. The young man took it in silence, but he did not once turn his eyes in the direction of the prisoner.

Ethelind had turned deadly pale when her lover entered, and she cowered down in her chair with a shiver of repulsion.

"Take care," whispered Colonel Falkner, for his quick eye detected her agitation at once. "It is very wrong for you to betray your repugnance to that man so openly."

"I hate—and fear him. I cannot help it," she answered back, half fiercely.

At this moment the magistrate arose, and, amid the breathless silence of the court, formally committed Vincent Erie to take his trial for the willful murder of Egbert Challoner. The officers were directed to remove the prisoner immediately, and the unfortunate young man was conveyed back to his cell.

That same afternoon both Colonel Falkner and Ethelind returned to Glenoaks, though in separate conveyances. The latter had an object in hurrying away so rapidly; she knew that she must meet Raymond, and meet him as a friend, if she remained longer, and that was a greater ordeal than she cared, in her present mood, to encounter.

CHAPTER XXI.

INVESTIGATIONS.

Poor DOLORES passed an anxious and sleepless night after the committal of her husband for trial.

About nine o'clock the next morning, having dressed herself in a suit of plain black, and put on her bonnet and shawl, she was about to leave the house when Aunt Jerry stalked out of the drawing room, and planted herself directly in the way.

"Where are you going?" she demanded, in a curt tone.

"To visit my husband."

Aunt Jerry drew herself up with an angry snort.

"Your husband!" she sneered. "That wretch is no more your husband than I am. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Dolores Gloyne."

Dolores bit her lip, and made an effort to pass on; but again she was intercepted.

"Stay where you are, you rebellious child. With my consent, you shall never pass out of that door bound on such a reprehensible errand."

"It is my duty to go," said Dolores, gently but firmly. "Please stand aside."

"Duty!" shrieked Aunt Jerry. "It is your duty to yield obedience to those who are older and wiser than yourself. Go back to your room, miss."

"I cannot. My husband expects me; I must go to him."

"I forbid you to go."

"But you have no authority to control my actions. I owe submission to none save my God and dear husband."

Aunt Jerry trembled with passion.

"Girl, is it your deliberate purpose to defy me?" she raved.

"No, I have no wish to do that," said Dolores, still speaking in a calm and gentle voice, though there was a flash of fire in her brilliant dark eyes. "But you should not usurp authority that does not rightfully belong to you. If you do, I have no resource but to rebel."

There was a silence. Suddenly Aunt Jerry caught hold of the girl's hand—her own was cold as ice—and saying "Come with me," in a dry, hard voice, drew her forward into the drawing-room. All that was mortal of Egbert Challoner lay there waiting for the last sad rites, which were to be performed at a later hour of that same day. The burial had been postponed as long as possible that Raymond might be present and superintend arrangements himself.

Aunt Jerry drew the shrinking girl close up to the coffin, which stood in the middle of the darkened room.

"Look there!" she said, in a raised voice, uncovering the face of the dead. "Look at your poor, murdered grandfather, and then go to the wretch who assassinated him if you have the heart to do it!"

Dolores burst into tears.

"Don't, Aunt Jerry. You shock and distress me. My burden is heavier than I can well bear, already."

Struggling clear of those relentless hands, Dolores hurried back to the hall, and sinking on a chair, gave way to a perfect storm of sorrow.

"You do feel ashamed of yourself—that is evident," said Aunt Jerry, grimly, for she had followed the girl out.

"No, it isn't that. But a trouble like this is so horrible. Sometimes I almost give way. But Vincent is innocent of poor grandpa's death! Did I not believe this from the depths of my soul I should shrink from him in as great horror as you do."

"Poor fool! Did not the murdered man's very last words fix the crime upon that villain?"

"It was a mistake—a dreadful mistake," shivered poor Dolores. "There was no light in the room, and grandpa must have taken some one else for Vincent."

"Poor, deluded fool!"

"I would stake my life on his innocence, and have told him so."

"You intend to cling to him in spite of everything?"

"I do."

"Mad girl! It is a wonder that your murdered relative does not rise out of his coffin to reproach you."

Dolores resolutely wiped away her tears.

"Appearances are very much against my husband," she said, very low. "But that is no reason why I should condemn him. Some day, this mystery will be cleared up, and I shall try to be patient until that time comes."

And before Aunt Jerry could raise another objection, Dolores had quietly stepped past, and left the house.

Like all gentle, loving women, she listened not to the voice of reason, but to that of her heart. In spite of the damning evidence against him, it was simply impossible for her to believe Vincent guilty of the heinous crime laid to his charge.

She found him pacing the floor of his cell, pale but calm. He had already had an interview with Mr. Nolan, the attorney who had been secured to defend him, and the man had just gone away with the frank admission that the case promised to be the most difficult one he had ever handled.

At the sight of his wife, however, the prisoner attempted to banish every appearance of concern from his manner and countenance; and embracing her, said cheerfully:

"You come into my cell like a sunbeam, Dolores, only you are much more welcome."

"I have brought you a little package," said Dolores, speaking in a hurried tone, to hide her agitation. "Here it is," and taking a roll of bank-notes from her pocket she spread them on the little table underneath the window.

"Why, where did you get so much money?" Vincent asked, in a tone of surprise.

"It was intrusted to me by your sister Ethelind before she went away, yesterday afternoon. She said this would secure a great many comforts that you might otherwise be compelled to do without. And she wished me to urge upon you the necessity of employing the very best counsel in the State for your defense. Her purse is at your command."

"Heaven bless her!" cried the poor prisoner, in a tone of deep emotion. "I know she would do anything in the world to help me."

Then, forcing a smile, he added:

"I feel very rich, darling. See, I can duplicate the sum you have brought, note by note."

So indeed he could. For, producing a second roll very similar in appearance to the first, he placed a note of like denomination upon each of those Dolores had laid down.

Looking into her wondering eyes, he said:

"This is Colonel Falkner's gift. He pushed the money into my hand when he came to say good-by."

"I am very glad."

Before she could add another word, the cell-door was opened, and the warden ushered in a small, quiet-looking man who proved to be none other than our old friend, Detective Ferret.

When the warden had withdrawn, and Vin-

WIFE OR WIDOW?

sent turned to greet the detective. Dolores placed herself beside him and said, eagerly:

"I intended this as a surprise, my love. I sent for Mr. Ferret, and have secured his services that the mysterious crime for which you suffer may be thoroughly investigated."

"Thank you, Dolores. It was, perhaps, the wisest thing you could have done."

Mr. Ferret quietly helped himself to a chair.

"What defense did you offer at the examination, Mr. Erle?" he said, fixing his light gray eyes upon the young man's face.

"None, except to put in the plea of 'not guilty,' and assure the magistrate and jury that I had left Mr. Challoner's grounds immediately after parting with Dolores, and had set out for Glenoaks without a moment's delay."

"What proof did you offer to substantiate your statement?"

"Alas, I had none save my simple word."

The detective appeared to ruminant for some time. At length he said:

"You may tell everything you can remember that has any bearing upon the events of that fatal night."

Vincent and Dolores, together, were enabled to give Mr. Ferret a very clear idea of the events that had already come to light. The two points in which he manifested particular interest, however, were those of Madam Zoe's mysterious disappearance, and the fact that Aunt Jerry had encountered a woman in the corridor when she was hurrying down-stairs after having been aroused by the cries of the murdered man.

"Where do the friends of this Madam Zoo reside?" he inquired.

"I do not know," Dolores answered; "but it is my belief that she resided in the South before coming to Dingle Dell."

"Who recommended her to Mr. Challoner?"

"She brought no testimonials, I have heard Aunt Jerry say. In the first place, she was taken on trial; but her duties were performed in a manner so satisfactory that she was permanently engaged."

"Did she never allude to her former life?"

"Never. Indeed she seemed averse to speaking of it even to answer such questions as might, from time to time, be asked."

"Of course she received letters occasionally from her friends!"

"No, sir. None ever came for her."

"That is strange," said the detective, in a musing tone.

"It is believed by some," said Dolores, looking up quickly, "that Madam Zoe could give important testimony in this case, and has withdrawn herself for that very reason."

"Humph!" muttered Mr. Ferret, shaking his head.

When he left the prison, however, he went directly to the railway station, and inquired for the night-agent. The man could throw no light upon the mystery, however. He had been at his post the night in question, but was certain that no lady had purchased a ticket of him, though several gentleman had done so.

"How far is it to the next station?" Mr. Ferret inquired.

"Four miles."

"Above or below?"

"Below."

Mr. Ferret hurried to the nearest livery-stable, and hired a boy to drive him down. Having reached his destination, and found the station-agent, his first question was this:

"Do all the night-trains stop here?"

"Yes, sir," was the ready answer. "They takes in wood and water at this p'int."

"How many night-trains are there?"

"Four, all told, sir—that is, I mean two each way," replied the station-agent, a big, rough-looking fellow who seemed to be something of a gossip. "They pass each other here."

"At what hours?"

"Ten in the evening and four in the morning."

"A great many people take tickets from this station, I suppose?"

"Well, not so very many, sir," said the man, scratching his head. "Sich as do, come, for the most part, from the village one mile below, down in the holler. Some days there are half a dozen; and very often, at night, there's nobody."

"Can you tell me if there was anybody to take the four o'clock train, Tuesday morning?"

"Tuesday? Let me see! That was the morning after poor old Mr. Challoner was murdered!"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Why, bless you, sir, there were two, that morning, and cur'us customers they were, too."

Never opened their heads to speak to a body, if they could help it."

"Men?"

"No, sir, a man and a woman. The man was all muffled up about his face. He rushed up just as the train was ready to start, threw down his money and asked in a squeaky voice for a ticket to B—. I gave him one, and he climbed onto the rear car just as the train was moving off."

"Did the woman go by the same train?"

"No, sir. She went in the opposite direction; and I should have told you about her afore, for she was the first to leave. She came in all alone, about three, and inquired about the trains. She sat a few moments, and then went out; and of course I stepped to the door and looked after her. She was walking up and down the railroad track, sir, as if she was on a wager."

"Did you see her face?" asked Mr. Ferret, eagerly.

"I did not. She was dressed in black, and had her veil down. I don't think she was a young woman, sir; but she was straight as a saplin' for all that. She purchased no ticket, but I saw her get aboard the down-train. There was somethin' cur'us about that woman, sir."

The detective was of the same opinion; but he merely said:

"Have you any grounds for thinking that the man and woman were acquaintances?"

"Not the slightest, sir; and what's more, I don't think so. The down-train leaves some three or four minutes before the other; and so far as I know the woman came and was gone before the man got here at all."

Mr. Ferret said nothing more, but he mentally decided that the whole circumstance was a very singular one!

CHAPTER XXII.

COLONEL FALKNER'S PERPLEXITY.

THE night was hot and still. Scarce a breath of air ruffled the foliage of the dark old trees that drooped lovingly over the gray walls of Glenoaks. The atmosphere seemed heavy and oppressive.

Until a late hour Colonel Philip Falkner sat in the small room on the ground floor that had been fitted up for a private study, poring over legal documents and reports of famous trials. He hoped to gather from these papers some hint that might be useful to Vincent; for though there were doubts in his own mind of the young man's innocence, he did not wish to see him suffer the full penalty of the law.

Rising languidly at length, as if wearied out with his long sitting, Colonel Falkner proceeded to the open window, and after standing there a moment stepped out. The crimson curtains fell together behind him, and the lamp that still burned within was the only indication that the room had been inhabited at all that evening.

Gray, leaden clouds covered the whole heavens like a pall. Even the night-birds were still; and the heavy, oppressive scent of flowers filled the air almost to faintness.

Plunging at once into the shrubbery, Colonel Falkner walked thoughtfully on in the direction of the sea. He had not proceeded far, however, when he saw some dark object fly swiftly from one group of evergreens to another, and pause there as if to rest or reconnoiter, though in all its movements there was an evident desire to shun observation.

"It is Ethelind," he thought. "Rash girl! She should not be wandering abroad at this hour of the night."

Sheltering himself behind a convenient trellis, he waited for the dark figure to come nearer. Several minutes elapsed before it moved at all, and then, as if in a sudden accession of courage, it started up and glided swiftly past within three or four yards of Colonel Falkner's hiding-place.

To his intense surprise, the figure did not prove to be Ethelind's after all, but that of a strange lady dressed in black, whose head and face were closely muffled in a thick veil.

She glided on rapidly in the direction of the house; and Colonel Falkner, startled, perplexed and curious, immediately turned and followed her, taking care to keep in the shadow and so far behind as not to attract her attention.

The mysterious lady made her way directly toward the window of the study, where the light still burned brightly behind the closely-drawn curtains. Pausing right before it, she stood for some time motionless, her head bowed as if either listening or praying.

Colonel Falkner stole a few steps nearer, feel-

ing more bewildered than ever. Suddenly the woman flung up her hands wildly, and a subdued wail broke from her lips.

"Oh, Philip, pity me! My heart is breaking!"

Something in that low, thrilling voice caused Colonel Falkner to start as though he had received an electric shock. It sounded familiar, and she had spoken his name! What did it mean? Did she know under whose window she stood, and was she there simply because it was his?

His heart beat a little faster, but he sprung forward, and caught the woman by the arm.

"Who are you?" he sternly demanded.

There was no answer save a low, frightened moan, and she seemed to shrink away from him as if in deadly terror.

"What are you doing here? Speak!"

In another instant he would have torn away the muffling veil, but the woman eluded the movement, and wrenching her arm from his grasp, darted swiftly past, and fled, with a shrill cry, into the darkest and densest of the shrubbery.

Colonel Falkner followed, but he could not overtake her. The black dress she wore blended naturally with the shadows that everywhere populated the grounds, and at the distance of a few rods she was completely lost to observation.

He desisted at last in sheer despair, and at the same instant a bitter, mocking laugh sounded beside him.

"You do well to give up the pursuit, Colonel Falkner. That woman is fleet of foot than yourself—you cannot overtake her!"

It was Ethelind's voice, and looking round in astonishment, he saw the girl standing just beyond him, her white, wasted features dimly distinguishable in the uncertain light.

"Ethelind!"

"Yes, it is I! You need not look so shocked."

"It is enough to shock me to find you roaming about at midnight. Are you mad?"

She passed both hands quickly over her forehead.

"Mad? Yes, I have been delirious these many weeks."

"Poor child," he said, in a tone of infinite pity. "I believe you."

"Then my vagaries should no longer astonish you."

"They pain me, Ethelind, deeply pain and grieve me. But you must not remain here. Take my arm, and I will lead you back to the house."

She obeyed, submissively as a little child, and not another word was spoken until he had drawn her through the open window, and they stood within the little study, when the lamplight fell on her pallid face and burning eyes.

"Now tell me why you were in the grounds?" he said.

"I could not sleep, and felt too nervous to remain in-doors," she answered, without looking at him. "Was it a greater crime for me to seek the fresh air than for you?"

"At least it is scarcely decorous for a young lady to be wandering about at midnight."

"I regret having offended against your notions of propriety," said Ethelind; but her tone was proud and cold.

Colonel Falkner remained silent for a moment, his gray eyes bent fixedly upon the girl's face. Suddenly he heaved a sigh, and said in a changed voice:

"You know, too, that strange woman I was pursuing?"

"I did."

"Who is she?"

"Do you not know?" Ethelind asked, quickly, meeting his gaze now for the first time.

"I have not the slightest suspicion."

"Then I can give you the necessary information. It was Mrs. Faunce."

He leaned toward her with a half suppressed cry of amazement.

"What! the new tenant of Lorn?"

"The very same."

"Indeed! I wonder that I did not think of her. Yes, you must be right. I have been told that Mrs. Faunce always goes abroad muffled up very much like the woman in question."

He spoke in a slow, dreamy tone, like one whose thoughts were busy.

"Ethelind, do you know why Mrs. Faunce came here?" he asked, abruptly, after a pause.

"I am not her confidante," was the haughty answer.

"It seems very singular," he went on, as if she had not spoken. "I cannot make it out."

Mrs. Faunce! The name is not a familiar one. And yet—”

Ethelind waited to hear no more. Her first impulse had been to tell him of that first visit Mrs. Faunce had paid to his chamber while he lay ill of the wound he had received. But she would not yield to it. Shrinking away from him, she glided, without another word, from the room.

“If Mrs. Faunce loves him, and wishes to keep that love a secret, I have no right to betray her,” she thought.

Colonel Falkner passed a sleepless night. He tried in vain to banish from his thoughts that mysterious figure, and the wailing cry he had overheard. “Oh, Philip, pity me! My heart is breaking.” But they haunted him like a spell. Strange, vague suspicions ran through his mind. Sad, sweet dreams were recalled, and half-forgotten memories. He shivered ever and anon with the creeping feeling that denizens of the other world were around him.

The next morning, urged by an impulse over which he had no control, he ordered the carriage out, and drove over to Lorn. The faithful old woman-servant, Joan Withers, answered his ring. She gave a perceptible start when she saw who was standing at the door.

“What do you want?” she demanded, in her sharp and most repellent tone.

“I have called to see your mistress—”

“Mrs. Faunce does not receive visitors,” Joan interrupted, making a movement to close the door.

“One moment, if you please. I am a neighbor, and if you tell her I am here, she will certainly grant me an interview.”

“My orders are positive to admit no one.”

“I have particular reasons for wishing to see Mrs. Faunce,” said Colonel Falkner, in an eager, half imploring voice.

Jean drew resolutely back.

“It makes no difference. I cannot let you in.”

“You can, at least, take my card to your mistress and leave her to decide for herself whether I am to be admitted or not.”

“It would be of no avail. Please go away.”

She shut the door in his face as she spoke; and Colonel Falkner, disappointed and angry, had no resort but to climb into his carriage and return home.

The next day he went again: and the day after, but with no different result. He was turning away from the door on the occasion of his third visit, when he encountered the house-maid, Phoebe Jelly. She silently beckoned him to follow her a few steps down the walk, out of sight from the house.

“You seem very anxious to see my mistress, sir,” said the girl, abruptly.

“I am.”

“Perhaps you are her lover, sir?”

The colonel felt his face flush; but, looking searchingly at the girl, he divined the truth instantly. She was aware of his unsuccessful visits, and being of a sentimental turn of mind had built up quite a romance in which he and Mrs. Faunce played the leading roles. All her sympathies seemed to be enlisted in his cause.

“I am the lady’s very good friend,” he answered, “and it pains me to be denied the pleasure of an interview.”

Phoebe glanced hastily all around, and then said in a whisper:

“Mrs. Faunce is very eccentric, sir. But whatever secrets she keeps from us servants, I am sure she should have none from a gentleman like you. I think I can help you, sir.”

“If you can, you will earn my undying gratitude,” said Colonel Falkner, slipping a bank-note into the girl’s hand.

Phoebe glanced at it, and her face brightened when she saw its amount.

“Thank you, sir. You are very generous. But I would have done just as much for you without being paid for it. Do you see that old summer-house at the end of the walk we are in?”

“Yes.”

“Mrs. Faunce will be there this evening, half an hour before sunset. It is one of her oddities. You will find her alone. She’s taken a fancy to the place, and goes there regularly every evening.”

And nodding her head intelligently, Phoebe turned and ran up the path. If he could not take his cue from a hint so palpable, the girl thought, he was not the ardent lover she had mentally set him down to be.

CHAPTER XXIII. THE MYSTERY OF MRS. FAUNCE.

The rose and gold of sunset were in the sky, and its reflected glory in the water, when Colonel Falkner crossed a strip of shingly beach and turned into a shady green lane where the lengthening shadows were already taking on the faint purplish tinge of coming twilight. Now and then, as he hurried along, he caught stray glimpses of the gray walls of Lorn between the trees, and his heart beat a little quicker as he thought of the strange errand that was bringing him once more into the hallowed seclusion of its grounds.

Shrewd, cultured man of the world though he was, Colonel Falkner felt himself drawn onward by a magnetism he was powerless to resist. The mysterious lady of Lorn had awakened an interest in his mind that could not be easily forgotten. Since the night when he had found her crouching before his study-window in that attitude of utter self-abasement, she had been continually in his thoughts.

“Who is she?” he said to himself, in eager, passionate accents. “Why has she come among us enveloped in such an atmosphere of mystery? I must know the truth—this suspense and perplexity are becoming unendurable. Oh, why is it that she so powerfully recalls the image of another—one lost to me forever—one I loved not wisely but too well?”

Wiping the cold damps of perspiration off his forehead, he climbed the stile in which the lane terminated, and rapidly approached the old summer-house to which Phoebe Jelly had directed him.

The low murmur of a woman’s voice fell upon his ears as he drew near. “She is there,” he thought, and, hurrying on breathlessly, paused in the low, arched, vine-hung entrance.

Mrs. Faunce sat in the far corner of the summer-house. The black, muffling veil was drawn tightly over her face, as usual, but she had thrown aside the cloak in which she so often appeared abroad, and the faultless proportions of a figure that seemed the personification of grace and beauty were revealed.

Colonel Falkner could not tell whether she had been praying aloud, or soliloquizing; for her voice died away in a low, gasping sound the instant she caught a glimpse of his figure, and, rising to her feet, she stood cowering there, her whole attitude abject and expressive of terror.

“Forgive me for intruding upon your seclusion, Mrs. Faunce,” he began, and his voice shook with an emotion he could not successfully control. “Your refusal to welcome me to your drawing-room drove me to this expedient.”

A low, frightened cry was her only answer.

“It was natural that I should persist in my efforts until I gained the opportunity of seeing you,” he added, advancing a step or two nearer.

She waved him back with a sweep of her arm that had something tragic in its fierceness.

“What do you want?” she demanded, in a hoarse, husky voice, evidently controlling herself with an effort.

“I came here hoping, at last, to be received as your friend.”

“My friend!” she repeated, with a gesture of scorn. “Good God! I have no friends. You only mock me by making such a profession.”

Her voice thrilled his very soul. Its sad, haunting sweetness rung in his ears like a strain of half-forgotten music.

“Mrs. Faunce, I wish to be your friend, if you will let me.”

“It cannot be.”

“Why not?”

“I gave up earthly friendships long ago.”

He involuntarily stretched out both his hands.

“Don’t say that,” he cried. “As long as one remains in this world there is always need of human help and human fellowship.”

“In the case of others that may be true; not in mine.”

Her head sunk on her breast and she leaned against the wooden framework for support. Colonel Falkner felt the blood curdling in his heart as he looked at her.

“Who and what are you?” he said, abruptly.

There was no answer.

“Speak! You might as well, for I feel assured that you are hiding your real identity behind a name that is not your own.”

“Then my desire to remain unknown ought to be respected.”

“Let me see your face, and I will go away content.”

“No, no,” she said, hastily. “I cannot. You know not what you ask.”

He drew nearer, his dry lips working.

“This mystery must be solved,” he exclaimed. “It is too distressing for endurance. You are no stranger to me—I feel, I know it. When and where did our acquaintance begin? Why is it that your very presence throws me into a fit of nervous agitation over which I have little control? Why does the sound of your voice cause my pulses to bound so violently? Why am I drawn hither, almost against my will? What, in short, is the secret of the strange magnetism you seem to exert upon me?”

“Is this true?” she cried, in a breathless whisper. “Do you really feel drawn toward me so powerfully as you pretend?”

“Yes. Why is it? I am sure you can explain the mystery if you will.”

She seemed to hesitate, and a strange tremor shook her from head to foot.

“Do I remind you of any one?” she asked, at length, her voice sounding curiously hollow.

“Yes.”

“Of whom?”

“It is too dreadful,” he said, shuddering in his turn. “The grave seems to have given up its dead. I saw the coffin-lid fastened above the remains of her you so strangely recall.”

Mrs. Faunce put up both hands quickly to her shrouded face, held them there a moment, and then suffered them to fall listlessly at her side.

“I am here under a false name and in a false character,” she said. “I do not deny it. But do not seek to learn more of me to-day. My secret, whatever it is, must be preserved a little longer.”

“But you will tell me all in your own time?”

“Yes, yes. You have my promise. Oh, if I dared, how gladly would I reveal everything before we part!”

Something in her smothered, agitated voice, and the wild way in which she clasped and wrung her hands, caused Colonel Falkner to draw nearer, and ask, almost in a whisper:

“Whom do you fear?”

“Yourself!”

He started back with a suppressed cry.

“You fear me? Oh, Mrs. Faunce, is fear the only sentiment I have succeeded in awakening in your bosom? Why do you fear me?”

“Ask me no more. In mercy’s name, let me go,” she said, imploringly, and made her way quickly toward the door.

“One word, Mrs. Faunce.”

He put his hand out to stop her, but she shrunk trembling away from him, and was gone before he could say anything more. He followed her out of the summer-house, but her black garments were already disappearing round a bend in the path.

“Good God! What is the meaning of this mystery? Why am I so wrought upon?” cried the perplexed man, sinking down upon a wooden bench, while the grayness of death overspread his face.

A moment later the soft rustle of a woman’s dress struck upon his ears. He tried to rally from the strange stupor that had come over him, but his head felt dreamy and confused, and a blur had come before his eyes.

“Oh, Colonel Falkner! What is the matter? Are you seriously ill?”

It was Ethelind’s voice, full of anxiety and grief. She laid her cold hand on his, but he pushed it off with a shiver of repulsion.

“I thought it was Mrs. Faunce—that she had returned,” he muttered.

The girl started and gasped for breath, as if some one had struck her a deadly blow. But she said no word in reply.

“I cannot understand why you should have followed me here,” Colonel Falkner exclaimed, in an angry voice. “Surely you have not descended to the mean part of playing the spy upon my movements?”

“These grounds are as free to me as to yourself—or should be,” she answered, her pallid features seeming to harden into stone.

“Tell me why you came. I will know.”

“Be assured that you had nothing to do with bringing me here.”

“Then you did not follow me?”

She lifted her head haughtily.

“You are at liberty to cherish your own convictions. The more degrading they are to me, the more tenaciously you will cling to them, of course.”

She was turning proudly away when her glance once more fell upon his face. Its ghastliness caused a sudden revulsion in her feelings. She sprang to his side, exclaiming in an agitated tone:

"You are ill! You look like death! Oh, sir, what can I do for you?"

"Nothing," he answered, in a softened tone. "It is merely a sudden faintness that will soon be gone. Sit down and watch with me until I am better."

She seated herself, submissively as a child, on the bench beside him. It would have been difficult to tell which face was the whitest at that moment.

"You are aware, of course, that I have just held an interview with Mrs. Faunce?" Colonel Falkner said, after a long silence.

"Yes."

"That lady has awakened a deep and romantic interest in my breast."

Ethelind looked round at him, wondering why he made the confession.

"Have you penetrated her disguise?" she asked, in a low voice.

"Not fully."

"And yet she must be very well known to you."

"True. When I try to look backward into the past, however, and fix upon her identity, my brain becomes confused in a moment."

"That is strange."

He shivered, and hid his face in his hands.

"Mrs. Faunce loves you," Ethelind added, in a strangely hollow voice. "Sometimes I am tempted to believe it was the passion you have inspired, and that alone, that brought her to Lorn."

No reply.

A sickening fear ran through the girl's heart, and she said with sudden vehemence:

"Is it possible that you are learning to love her in return—that you have suffered your affections to fix themselves upon a woman so encompassed with mystery and suspicion?"

"I can scarcely analyze the sentiments of my own heart."

"Tell me the tru'th."

"I certainly feel drawn toward her as toward no other human being. But the secret of this magnetism is as deeply hidden from me as from yourself; and of its possible results I dare not speak."

Ethelind turned away, hiding her face. Some blows are too deep for moan or tear. She felt like one who has received the sentence of doom. Though all her own mad, idolatrous love had failed to awaken a responsive echo in his breast, this unknown woman had appeared on the scene, and in an hour, as it were, drawn him into her toils! It seemed too bitter.

After a long silence, she tottered to her feet.

"You are better now," she said, in a strange, husky voice. "I want to go away from here."

"We will go together—we will return home," he answered, rising also, and his tone sounded as constrained as her own.

The sun had been a long time down, and night's shadows were brooding over sea and shore, when at length they wearily climbed the steps leading up to Colonel Falkner's door.

Mrs. Falkner met them in the hall. She looked anxious and troubled.

"How late you are!" she exclaimed. "I would have sent for you, only I did not know in what direction you had gone. Mr. Challoner is here."

Even as she spoke, the drawing-room door opened, and Raymond appeared. He was dressed in a full suit of black, and it was these funeral garments, perhaps, that gave his handsome face a ghastly expression quite unusual there.

Bowing low to Colonel Falkner, the young man held out both hands to Ethelind. She did not take them; but, shrinking away from him with a glance of fear and horror, glided swiftly down the hall.

CHAPTER XXIV.

RAYMOND'S REVELATION.

"I WISH to speak with you alone, if you are at leisure," Raymond said, the lines about his mouth hardening a little, as he turned once more to Colonel Falkner, after Ethelind had disappeared.

"Certainly. Step this way, if you please."

Conducting his guest to his own private study, where they would be safe from intrusion, Colonel Falkner placed a chair for him, and threw himself on a low couch near the door.

"What is your pleasure with me, Mr. Challoner?" he said, coldly.

A slight flush kindled in the young man's face.

"I think you can readily divine the subject upon which I wish to consult with you," he said.

"I am not sure that I do."

"It is about my marriage," Raymond impulsively answered. "I am tired of these vexatious delays. They are very trying to an ardent young lover."

"The circumstances are peculiar—"

"Of course you refer to Ethelind's failing health," came the eager interruption. "But I could take her away from here, as soon as the ceremony was performed. With an entire change of scene, I am sure she would quickly rally."

"It is strange that you should wish to marry so soon after your grandfather's dreadful death."

Raymond gave a sort of gasp, as if he were choking. But he soon recovered himself.

"The arrangements were made prior to that fatal event," he said, in a low tone. "My poor grandfather would not have wished us to delay on account of it."

Colonel Falkner shook his head.

"It would certainly show a lack of respect for his memory."

"I do not think so."

"You have Ethelind's position to consider as well as your own. Her only brother is in prison, remember, awaiting trial for the murder of your aged relative."

Raymond looked uneasy.

"In the opinion of most persons, this fact would be a sufficient reason why the marriage should be broken off altogether."

"But not in mine," was the vehement answer. "Ethelind has nothing to do with the question of her brother's guilt or innocence. I love her too well to give her up."

"Of course you must be guided by your own convictions of what is best," said Colonel Falkner, stiffly. "For my part, I would like to see the engagement annulled."

A sneer curled the young man's lip.

"I can readily believe it," he retorted. "My suspicions were awakened some time since. You would be glad, no doubt, to keep your beautiful ward for yourself."

Colonel Falkner's face flushed, but it was with pain rather than with anger.

"Hush," he said, sternly. "I never gave you any occasion for making such a remark."

"You cannot be wholly indifferent to Ethelind's loveliness and her devotion to yourself. That would be unnatural."

"I tell you truly that if Ethelind were the only woman on the face of the earth, I should still feel as little inclination as I now do, to appropriate her to myself. Let that assurance suffice. The subject is a painful one to me, and must never again be broached between us."

His deep, steady tone carried conviction to Raymond's mind. All the jealous fears he had been cherishing were dispelled in an instant.

"Forgive me," he said, earnestly. "I know I can place implicit confidence in your word. Now if you will speak a word in my favor, the next time you see Ethelind, I shall have nothing to desire."

There was a listener to this conversation, of whose proximity neither speaker dreamed—Ethelind herself. When she fled down the hall, to avoid Raymond, she had dropped, pale and faint, into a chair occupying a little niche just beyond the study door. The two gentlemen, as they passed in, had closed the door, but neglected to latch it. Every word reached her ears distinctly.

At first she was really too sick and giddy to stir. Hearing her own name mentioned at length, she sat up, her heart beating as if it would suffocate her. Not until the interview seemed to be nearing its conclusion, did she find strength to rise and grope her way up-stairs to her own room.

Oh, the long agony of that night! Ethelind never once closed her eyes. She felt like one bereft of every hope. Did Colonel Falkner care so little for her as his words implied? Ah! she was drinking the dregs of the humiliating cup at last!

Of course morning found her without strength or courage sufficient to emerge from her retirement. Raymond waited about until nearly noon, watching for her; and then, feeling the need of exercise, left the house for a walk.

Almost unwittingly his footsteps were turned in the direction of Lorn. The mystery which the old house harbored was one belonged to unravel. He could not readily forget the circumstances attending the only visit he had ever paid to the place, and its eccentric mistress had awakened more than an ordinary interest in his mind.

"Ethelind chooses to remain invisible, and I might as well solace myself with a visit to Mrs. Faunce," he muttered. "But for the startling

events that have recently occurred, I should have made it my object, ere this, to learn something more of that strange woman."

Phoebe Jelly answered his ring. Doffing his hat, he asked in his most insinuating tones for Mrs. Faunce.

"You can't see her," said Phoebe, grimly.

"But I am her friend."

"Can't help that, sir. She's got a lover already. Go away."

Raymond stared at the girl, wondering if she was in her proper senses.

"What do you mean by saying that Mrs. Faunce has a lover?" he exclaimed.

"Just what the words imply, sir," Phoebe answered, bridling. "And he's a deal handsomer than you; and I hope he'll win her from the error of her ways, poor dear lady. That I do."

"Who is this lover to whom you refer?"

"I won't tell you."

Raymond bit his lip.

"Why, then, did you speak of him at all, if you are unwilling to tell me all about him?"

"Humph! You ought to thank me for warning you in time, instead of looking so grum about it. I didn't want any broken hearts on my lady's account. Now that's all you'll get from me. Be off with you, about your business."

Phoebe slammed the door in his face, and he had no resource but to turn away. After a moment's thinking, he walked deliberately round the house toward the windows of the room he had entered on a former occasion. They were closed, and the curtains tightly drawn. Not a sign of life was anywhere visible.

Raymond turned reluctantly to leave the grounds. Looking back as he moved slowly down the path, he caught a momentary glimpse of a black muffled figure standing at one of the upper windows like the shadow of an impending doom. Shuddering, he scarcely knew why, he accelerated his pace, and not until house and figure were both shut from his view by the intervening trees did he draw a free breath again.

When the lamps were lighted in the evening, Raymond repaired to the drawing-room, and sat there alone. For hours he had been brooding over a new plan of procedure in his wooing, and now he resolved to put it into execution. The day had passed, and Ethelind had avoided him as she always did. His patience was exhausted. Rising at length, and opening the door, he spoke to one of the housemaids:

"Go to Miss Erle's room," he said, "and tell her that I solicit the honor of an interview. I have a revelation to make—one that she ought to hear."

He stood pale and trembling in the center of the apartment, awaiting the result of his message. After a few moments the door softly un-closed and Ethelind entered—he had scarcely expected she would come—and crossed the floor. An involuntary cry broke from his lips. She looked wretched and forlorn—fully ten years older than when he had seen her, for one brief moment, the night before.

"Oh, Ethelind, I am sorry to see you looking so ill."

She came close up to him.

"You sent for me," she said, in a cold, calm voice. "What do you want?"

He took her hand, and would have conducted her to a seat, but she repulsed him.

"Do not touch me. If you have any thing to say, let me hear it at once."

"I want you to name our wedding-day."

"Is that why you sent for me?" she asked, her fine lip curling.

"That is one of my reasons."

She shuddered and looked away. After a moment's silence, Raymond compelled her to meet his gaze again.

"The message I sent you had its meaning," he added, in a whisper. "I said I had a revelation to make, and it is true. When you have heard it, I think you will feel less reluctant to give yourself to me."

Her eyes fell—a faint color kindled in her cheeks.

"Well?" she said.

"Do you know what has estranged Colonel Falkner and his mother? Do you know why they have shunned your presence these past few weeks, and treated you so coldly?"

"I do not."

"Shall I tell you?"

She could only bow her head. The strangeness of their behavior had long been a subject of troubled conjecture. Did Raymond indeed possess a key to the mystery?

"Perhaps it is best that you should know the truth," said Raymond, at length, in a rough and

altered voice. "Both Mrs. Falkner and your guardian believe it was *you* who made that murderous assault upon the life of the latter!"

Ethelind's eyes slowly dilated, and she looked at him in half-scared amazement. Not at once could her mind drink in the full horror of the revelation.

"What do you say?" she enunciated, slowly. "I—I—do not think I quite catch your meaning." And she passed both hands quickly over her forehead.

He repeated the cruel words. "Let me tell you the whole truth, Ethelind," he added. "They think it was *my* life you sought, not Colonel Falkner's. We had changed rooms that fatal night, you remember. You could not have been aware of the change at the time. In a moment of insanity, it is thought, you sought to free yourself from my claims by a fearful crime."

Ethelind stood like a marble image.

"I do not share Colonel Falkner's suspicion," Raymond went on. "You are incapable of such an act of madness, and I could take you to my heart just as readily as though the breath of suspicion had never sullied you."

She seemed to rouse at length from the spell that was on her. "Oh, my God! my God!" she cried out, sharply. "This is the bitterest blow of all!"

Scarcely knowing what she did, she rushed down the hall to the door of the study. Colonel Falkner sat there, at his desk, writing. She tottered forward, threw herself at his feet, and broke out into a frenzy of the wildest ravings.

"Speak to me," she cried at length, when she had grown calmer—though it was the calmness of utter despair. "Tell me you never believed me guilty of that dark night's work! How could you? It would be wicked. Oh, you never, never for one moment, believed me capable of such a heinous crime! Why don't you tell me so?"

In spite of her incoherency Colonel Falkner gathered the meaning of her wild words at once. With a look of compassion on his face, he tried to raise her.

"Hush," he said, soothingly. "Pray calm yourself. You could not have been in your right mind that dreadful night. Let us try to forget it."

"Do you believe me guilty?" she asked, the cold perspiration starting on her forehead.

He shuddered, and looked away.

That gesture was enough. Ethelind started to her feet, with a bitter cry, and went back to the drawing-room where she had left Raymond Challoner.

He was there still, walking up and down the floor. She staggered up to him, and held out her hand.

"It is all over," she said, huskily. "I am ready for anything. There is my hand, if you still wish to claim anything so tainted."

He caught it, and covered it with kisses.

"My darling! do you really give yourself to me at last?"

"I want to go away from here. I must go, or I shall die. Whatever is done, must be done quickly."

"So much the better," he said, in an eager voice. "This is Tuesday. We can be married Thursday evening, if you wish."

"I want to go away," she faintly repeated; and the words sounded like the knell of hope.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE SECOND BRIDAL EVE.

The two intervening days passed quickly. Ethelind moved about pale and passive as a saint awaiting martyrdom. She seemed utterly indifferent to her fate.

The wedding was to be strictly private. No invitations to friends or relatives were extended—all parade would have seemed out of place under the circumstances. Not even Dolores had been summoned.

The poor bride's face was whiter than her dress when at length Phillis knocked at her door to say that all was ready. The tender-hearted woman burst out crying the instant she looked at her.

"Oh, my p'or chile!" she sobbed. "It's jess like a-huryin' you! I know your heart ain't in this marriage. Don't do it, honey, don't gib yourself away. Bress de Lord, it ain't too late to turn back!"

Ethelind answered not a word. Pale and calm she passed the weeping servant, and prepared to descend the stairs. Mrs. Falkner stood waiting on the landing, and her haughty face wore a softer expression than usual.

"I hope you will be happy, my dear," she said, pressing a cold kiss on the bride's forehead.

"My prayers will follow you on your journey. When you return we shall be better friends, I am sure, than we have been of late."

Mrs. Falkner had never spoken so kindly since that fatal night. Ethelind's lip quivered with emotion.

"Try to think of me as kindly as you can; that is all I ask," she whispered, in response.

A few moments later, she stood in a flood of light, at the upper end of the drawing-room, and the solemn words of the marriage-service were ringing in her ears. She heard them as one hears a faint, far-off roar—vaguely. They carried no meaning to her stunned mind. She knew not what responses she made, or whether, indeed, she made any.

Raymond's kiss roused her from this lethargy. "God bless you," he whispered, as his lips touched hers. "You are now all my own—my wife."

She was seized with a fit of shivering. "Is it all over?" she said, in a faint voice. "Can I go back to my room? I—I—am not well."

Her face was ashy pale, and he saw her gasp for breath. Calling hastily to Mrs. Falkner, Raymond placed his bride in the charge of that lady.

"This scene has been too much for Ethelind," he said. "Will you be good enough to take her up-stairs? She ought to lie down."

"Poor child!"

There was real compassion in Mrs. Falkner's tones, as she passed her arm round Ethelind's trembling figure. She could afford to pity the pale bride who was going from her in such unhappiness.

Yielding to the moment's impulse, Ethelind turned, at the door, to look back. She knew that Colonel Falkner had been in the room, a witness to the ceremony, but not once had she trusted herself to glance in his direction. She had not spoken to him since that bitter scene in the study.

Now her eyes glued themselves to his face. Oh, the long agony of that gaze! It seemed as if her heart would break, and instinctively she clasped her hand over it. The anguish that thrilled her soul could not have been deeper if she was taking leave of his dead body. Was he not dead to her?

"Take me away," she said, faintly gasping. "I can bear no more."

With some show of kindness, Mrs. Falkner got the poor girl up-stairs to her own chamber and removed her veil, gloves, and the bridal finery that only made her pale cheeks look so much the more ghastly in contrast. Then she persuaded her to lie down on the bed and brought a composing draught.

"The train which you are to take is due at twelve-thirty," she said. "You will have two good hours in which to recuperate. Try to sleep."

"Two hours!" Ethelind repeated, raising her heavy eyes. "Can I have them all to myself, Mrs. Falkner?"

"Certainly—unless you prefer that I should sit with you."

"No, no. I wish to be alone—all alone!"

Mrs. Falkner looked uneasy. The sight of that pinched, blue, miserable face awakened a remorseful pity in her breast. Now that it was too late, she regretted not having interposed to prevent the marriage. She might, at least, have done that.

"Very well," she said, trying to calm herself. "Nobody shall disturb you until the carriage comes to take you to the train."

"Thank you."

Mrs. Falkner was moving reluctantly toward the door when Ethelind spoke to her again.

"One word, dear madam," she said, firmly, though her pale lips trembled. "I know of what you and—and—my guardian suspect me. But I am not guilty. I could not go away without first assuring you of my innocence."

"Oh, Ethelind!"

"We will not talk about it now," turning her head away impatiently. "I am not strong enough. And it would be of no use, perhaps, for I know that circumstantial evidence is strong against me. Please go away."

The appeal was not one to be disregarded. Mrs. Falkner left the room, though with a hesitating step.

She would have been glad of a more thorough understanding. Had she really been laboring under a delusion all these wretched weeks? Ah, if so, how fearfully her vile suspicions had wronged the innocent! She could not bear to think of it.

Ethelind had not been left alone above ten

minutes when she suddenly rose from the couch, a changed being. Her heavy eyes lighted up and burned with a fierce brightness above the pallid cheeks. Her bosom rose and fell with the violence of newly-awakened emotions. She became strong, resolute, determined all at once.

It was the thought of her future life—a future spent with Raymond Challoner—that had roused her so suddenly. A great horror came over her—she felt that she could not meet the ordeal. The thought of flight came to her like an inspiration. It was the only way of saving herself from a living death.

Always rash, willful and impetuous, she resolved to put the plan of escape that had occurred to her ill-regulated mind into immediate execution.

She did not pause to consider the practicability of flight. There was no time for that. She felt that she must get away somewhere, or die, and that was enough.

Quickly arraying herself in a dark traveling-dress, she packed a few articles of clothing and her jewelry in a hand-bag, and tied a thick veil over her bonnet. Thus equipped, she stepped to the door, and stood there a moment to see if anybody was moving in the corridor, and as all was still, glided swiftly toward a back staircase which she descended, letting herself out at a side door.

Here she paused long enough to glance nervously all round, and finding herself still undetected, flitted like a shadow down the nearest path.

It had been arranged that the bridal couple should proceed directly to New York, and from thence continue their journey to Saratoga, Niagara Falls, and other places of resort.

The carriage, which was to convey them to the village station, was at the door, and Mrs. Falkner had gone up-stairs to help Ethelind put on her wraps, before the flight of the bride was discovered.

Even then, finding no one in the room, Mrs. Falkner merely came to the conclusion that Ethelind had stepped into one of the adjoining chambers to gather up some of her possessions. There was no time to lose, however, so she rung the bell and dispatched the housemaid, who answered the summons, to look for her young lady.

"Tell her to make haste," said Mrs. Falkner, nervously. "It is very late; she will hardly catch the train in any event."

The maid hurried from room to room, returning after the lapse of ten or fifteen minutes, to report that Ethelind was not in the house.

By this time Mrs. Falkner had become thoroughly alarmed. Hurrying down to the drawing-room where Colonel Falkner and Raymond stood conversing in subdued tones, she broke in upon them abruptly.

"That mad girl has run away, I do believe!" she exclaimed. "She cannot be found!"

There was a pause of consternation; then Raymond stepped up to her and said, just audibly:

"You cannot mean Ethelind?"

"Who else should I mean?"

"She is gone?"

"Yes. Two hours ago I left her lying on her bed, and now she is missing."

Raymond turned very pale; but he wheeled round and went out without replying. Calling to one of the maids, he went over the whole house himself, and afterward caused the garden to be searched. But all in vain.

The carriage still waited at the door. Looking fierce and sullen, Raymond went out to it, at length, and drove to the village station. There was no longer any doubt in his mind but that his bride of an hour had fled.

"She may have taken the very train in which we were to have gone together," he muttered, doggedly. "If so, I shall telegraph for her to be detained at one of the way-stations."

No clew could be discovered, how ever, by which to trace Ethelind's flight. The twelve-thirty train had been gone some minutes when he reached the station, but the night-agent assured him that no lady unattended had taken tickets that evening. The lady passengers were but three in number, in fact, and the agent knew all of them personally or by sight, and Miss Erle was certainly not of the number, he said, or he would have noticed her.

And so Raymond re-entered the carriage again, and returned to Glenoaks in a frame of mind that can more readily be imagined than described.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE AGONY OF SUSPENSE.

MEANWHILE, though the days were slipping by with dreadful rapidity, they brought no fresh hopes of deliverance to the poor prisoner, Vincent Erle.

Detective Ferret had done what he could. The case seemed a particularly difficult one, however, and he made little progress. But his own belief in the young man's innocence strengthened from day to day, and that was something, for it inspired him with courage for renewed effort.

The anxiety and suspense of this trying time told most severely on the unfortunate young wife, Dolores. Her health and spirits visibly declined. Morning after morning, as she wended her way to the prison, her step became more languid, her cheek thinner and paler. She seemed crushed by the load of sorrow she had to bear.

Even Aunt Jerry remarked the change, and her heart melted with pity and tenderness.

"Poor soul! poor motherless girl!" was her muttered comment. "She is passing through deep waters. For her sake, I wish I had held my peace, leaving vengeance with God. How she must love that young reprobate to cling to him so tenaciously!"

The spinster's heart gave a leap, while sigh after sigh heaved her bosom. The remembrance of her own dead love was gradually working a softening influence upon her nature. It was making her more considerate for the woes of others.

One morning when Dolores was leaving the house on her daily visit to the prison, Aunt Jerry intercepted her at the door and drew her into one of the small anterooms.

"I don't like to see you looking so broken-hearted, child," she said. "It makes me feel remorseful, as though I were, somehow, the cause of your misery."

"You must not look at it in that light," Dolores answered, with a rising sob.

"How can I help it? Vincent Erle might have gone scot-free had not I denounced him."

"Never mind. You did what you believed to be your duty."

Aunt Jerry looked earnestly into the girl's agitated face.

"Do you cherish no resentment, child?"

"None. Why should I?"

"Oh, dear! oh, dear! I wish my tongue had been plucked out by the roots before it uttered a single word against your husband! I do, indeed."

Dolores gave a sort of gasp, and fell to crying hysterically.

"Are you sure, quite sure, that my poor grandfather spoke those dreadful words you have attributed to him?" she said in a whisper.

"Oh, Lord! I wish I wasn't."

"Is it not possible that you, in your excitement, mistook some other name for his?"

Aunt Jerry sullenly shook her head.

"I heard it too distinctly; and my ears never play tricks with me."

"I do not understand it," said Dolores, breaking into a subdued wail. "Grandpapa must have been deceived, then, must he not? I will believe any thing but that Vincent is guilty."

"Dear lamb! I'll swear to a lie, and tell judge and jury that the poor murdered man didn't say what he did, if you'll only smile again!" cried Aunt Jerry, utterly overcome.

"No, no," said Dolores, gently. "It is over and done with. You could not have helped taking the course you did."

On reaching the prison, that day, Dolores found her husband sitting, pale and languid, on the side of the cot. For her sake he had borne his hard lot uncomplainingly up to this moment. Even now his haggard face lighted up with a smile at her coming, but the anxious wife could not be deceived.

"Vincent, dear," she said, "you have been borrowing trouble."

"I'll do so no more. I will look on the bright side to the latest moment."

"Is there a bright side?" she uttered, in the thrilling accents of despair. "To me it seems all black and terrible."

The poor fellow drew a deep breath, as if struggling with some strong emotion.

"For shame, Dolores," he said, with a pitiful attempt at playfulness. "To whom can I look for encouragement, if you turn croaker?"

"Forgive me."

"I've had a fit of despondency this morning—I don't deny it," he added, taking her two hands and drawing her toward him. "But now that you are with me again, I shall banish it. We will be brave, my darling."

"Yes, very brave," she answered, steadily; but the dew was in her eyes.

Just at this moment a key grated in the lock, and Mr. Ferret was ushered into the cell. The detective seemed disconcerted at finding Dolores there, but he bowed to her profoundly before turning to greet the prisoner.

The expression of the man's face on entering had not been lost on Dolores. After an awkward pause she said, in the lowest audible tone:

"I think you have some business with my husband, sir. Do not let my presence be a restraint upon you."

"My business can wait, madam."

"It is not necessary that it should," she answered, quickly. Then she lifted a beseeching glance to Vincent's face, and added:

"Tell him to speak freely, my love, that you have no secrets from your wife. If he brings good news, I shall be rejoiced to hear it. If it is bad, I wish to help you bear it."

Vincent turned a shade paler.

"My wife has a right to know the worst," he said, addressing the detective. "Keep nothing back."

"Very well," said Mr. Ferret, bowing. "After all there is little or nothing to communicate. I came merely to ask for my dismissal from your employ."

"On what ground?"

"I can do nothing. The case is beyond my scope. You but waste money by retaining me and it is but just to tell you so."

A shudder passed through the prisoner, but he said, quietly:

"You have done what you could to clear up the mystery that surrounds my case?"

"Yes."

"What is your opinion of my chances?"

"Shall I tell you?" said the detective, and he looked askance and troubled at Dolores.

"I hope you will."

"Well, it is a nasty case. Just look at the leading facts for a moment. The deceased was your avowed enemy; he violently opposed your paying your addresses to his granddaughter. Then came the secret marriage; old Mr. Challoner discovered it, was very angry, and threatened to cut off his grandchild with a shilling; the lawyer was summoned, everything made ready for a new will to be drawn up. It is known that you were at Dingle Dell the night of the murder, and that Mr. Challoner's sudden determination to disinherit your wife was made known to you. Last of all comes Mrs. Jerry Martin's damning evidence—the last words of the dying man. But I need not dwell upon all this—it is too painful."

There was silence. Dolores had seated herself and turned away her face. Now she looked up quickly, choking back the sob that had risen in her throat.

"You have forgotten the strange woman Aunt Jerry met on the landing," she said, in a faint voice.

"No, I have not forgotten her. If that woman was Madam Zoe, as I strongly suspect, her testimony might be of the first importance. But she cannot be found."

"Let the search be thorough," said Dolores, clasping her hands. "Oh, leave no stone unturned."

"I have done what I could. The whole country round has been scoured, and descriptions of Madam Zoe's person sent to New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore. But it is of no use. Not a clew to her hiding-place can be discovered."

Vincent looked uneasy.

"Unless the woman can be found, mine is a lost cause—is that what you mean?" he said.

"It is. And I fear that she has left the country."

Dolores laid her hand timidly on his arm.

"Don't give up the search," she said, imploringly. "Don't permit any thing to discourage you. Think, think, what there is at stake—an immortal life! What do we care for the expense incurred? Let us go out from here beggars, if need be. Oh, promise me, do promise, that you will work to the last!"

The detective drew hastily away, brushing his hand over his eyes.

"There, there," he uttered. "Don't say another word, madam. I will work; something may come of it yet. I was a fool to think of giving up the search because of a few discouragements. Henceforth it shall be prosecuted with new vigor."

"God bless you."

Misfortunes never come singly. It was this same day, while the cloud of despondency was still upon them, that Vincent and Dolores received their first intimation of the marriage

at Glenoaks, and the subsequent flight of the bride.

"Poor Ethelind," said Vincent.

Dolores burst into tears.

"She never loved Raymond—why was she driven at last into a marriage she abhorred?"

"It does seem very singular that she should have wedded him and then fled from him as soon as the ceremony was performed."

"Poor wayward child. I am so sorry for her. Raymond was never worthy of her. I hope—I do hope—that he will never find her."

"Dolores!" uttered Vincent, reprovingly.

"I do," she repeated, still sobbing. "He is cold, cruel, selfish. I can feel no love or respect for him though he is my cousin. He will crush her heart just to show his power over her."

She was silent a moment or two, and then drew closer to her husband's side.

"Raymond has never once been to see you since this trouble began—had you thought of that?" she whispered.

"He believes me guilty, no doubt; and in that case of course he would not come."

"But he does not even come to Dingle Dell!"

"I am surprised to hear that."

"He has not passed a single night there since grandpapa was buried. I believe he has taken a sudden antipathy to the place."

"How strange!" exclaimed Vincent, in a amusing tone. And then the conversation was dropped.

After that the days seemed to glide by more rapidly than ever, for each one was bringing nearer the time appointed for the trial. Dolores tried to be brave, but her soul sickened with despair, for no new evidence came to light as time wore on. Detective Ferret, though indefatigable in his efforts, could accomplish little, coping single-handed as he was with the startling array of facts he had to confront.

The prisoner himself did not even attempt to shut his eyes to the hopelessness of his cause. But trouble had strengthened and disciplined his nature; instead of murmuring, he endeavored to put self and selfish interests out of his thoughts altogether, and set himself to the task of cheering and encouraging poor Dolores.

The day previous to that appointed for the trial the wretched wife remained later than usual in her husband's cell. She had been very calm throughout the long interview, but it was the calmness of despair. When she arose to go, Vincent took her into his arms to say good-bye.

"Ask God to sustain you, darling," he whispered. "He is your only refuge."

"I will," she answered.

"To-morrow will be a dreadful day for us both. I think you realize this?"

"Yes," she said, faintly gasping.

"Try to prepare yourself for the trial. It is impossible to tell beforehand how it is all this sort will terminate. You will never know."

She did not reply, but fixing on him a look as if her heart were broken, hurried from the cell.

An hour later she stumbled up the steps at Dingle Dell as if stricken with sudden blindness. Aunt Jerry was on the watch and let her in. The instant the door opened, Dolores fell forward senseless into the startled woman's arms.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE VERDICT.

ALL that night Dolores lay on the couch in her chamber, still and silent as if life itself had gone out with the last faint ebbing of hope. Aunt Jerry hovered round the bed, grim, anxious and miserable, but the suffering girl had not resolutions enough to send her away; so they shared the vigil together—one that neither would soon forget.

When morning dawned, Dolores roused herself from the state of petrification in which she had remained so many hours. In spite of the woman's remonstrances, she dressed herself carefully in an entire suit of black, and sat down to wait for the carriage that was to convey her to the court-room.

"You are not fit to stir from the house," said Aunt Jerry, emphatically, "and you mustn't think of going to the trial."

"My testimony may be wanted," said the poor soul.

"I don't care if it is. All the judges and juries in the land shan't drag you into the witness-box when you are too ill to stand!"

"But I wish to go—I must!"

"Now don't be a fool. The court-room is no place for a lady. Take my advice and remain at home."

"My husband will be there. It may strengthen him to know that I am near," said Dolores.

turning so very pale that Aunt Jerry feared she was about to faint again.

"There, there," she said hastily, with a sudden touch of tenderness. "Poor child, I oppose you no longer. Go, if you must. I might do the same thing, were I circumstanced as you are."

She regretted the decision of Dolores, however, for well she knew what a fiery ordeal awaited her. The pity she felt for the poor girl was even greater than her desire to be avenged on Egbert Challoner's murderer. A thought had been buzzing about in her brain all through the night, and now it recurred again.

"My testimony is the most damaging of any that will be offered against Vincent Erle this day," she said to herself, striding up and down the room very much as a man would have done. "If I help to hang him there will be two deaths for which to answer, for Dolores would not long survive him. He deserves to swing as high as Haman; but then how can I entail such suffering on that innocent child? I'm tempted to take myself off and stop in hiding until the trial is over."

She wheeled round and glanced at the clock on the chimney-piece. It was half-past eight, and at nine an express train passed through the village. She could reach it by being expeditious.

"I'll do it!" she cried aloud, with sudden energy. "It's nobody's business but my own. When the State attorney calls my name to-day, nobody will be there to answer to it."

Laughing grimly at the mental picture her words called up, Aunt Jerry hurried to her own room, and in five minutes' time had put on her cloak and bonnet, made up a small bundle which was easily stowed away in the ample pocket of her skirt, taken such money as she had in the house, and had stolen forth with a soft, cat-like tread.

"What will they say when they find me missing, as well as Madam Zoe?" she chuckled, taking the shortest route to the station and hurrying on breathlessly. "There will be some staring, and more swearing, when the fact comes out."

She had turned the last corner and was within twenty yards of the station when a policeman she knew by sight crossed the street, and rapidly drew near.

"Good-morning, Miss Martin," said the man, thrusting out his big, red hand. "Fine morning for the trial!"

"The morning is well enough," snapped Aunt Jerry, angry at being stopped, and that he should have presumed to address her in this familiar manner. "Stand out of my way, fellow."

"You seem to be in a hurry, Miss Martin."

"Well, if I am, that's my business and not yours."

"Of course," said the policeman, with a deprecating smile. "I do not wish to be impertinent."

"But you are," retorted Aunt Jerry.

"Excuse me. I would be glad to ask a few questions relating to the trial if you do not mind."

"I do mind, very much," cried Aunt Jerry, who at this instant heard the shriek of the in-coming train. "Stand aside; I can't stay to be bothered with your trials."

... will walk on together." "I'll go with you company." "I, for I want yours."

... stared at the man in blank astonishment.

"You ... think," she gasped. "If you don't get out of my way this instant I'll call one of the station guards and have you given in charge."

"No you won't."

"Why won't I—I'd like to know?"

"Because I have you in charge already," said the officer, dropping his hand on her arm.

Aunt Jerry's color faded. Her blood turned cold as ice, and she began to tremble.

"What do you mean by this insult?" she demanded.

"You shall smart for this!"

"I have my orders. Miss Martin, and daren't disobey them. You are the most important witness in the case that's on to-day, and I cannot lose sight of you."

"I shall lose the train!" shrieked Aunt Jerry.

"Of course. You can't leave the village to-day. Come along. Your evidence is wanted."

"I won't testify!"

"You can't help yourself."

"But I say I won't. I'd like to know who can compel me against my will?"

The officer smiled.

"That's a matter to be settled between you and the judge. I hope you will come with me quietly."

Aunt Jerry uttered a groan of despair, but she offered no further resistance. It would have been useless, as she well knew; so, turning about, she followed the policeman to the court-room, which had just been opened.

The prisoner was brought in after a little delay. Aunt Jerry leaned forward and gasped for breath, for Dolores, closely veiled, was clinging to his arm. The poor soul crossed the room with tottering steps, and seemed to sink half-fainting into the chair that was placed for her.

"Poor lamb! She'll go off into another swoon; I know she will!" muttered Aunt Jerry.

The proceedings commenced. The testimony had been given, for the most part, already, and need not be recapitulated. The witnesses were locked into one of the smaller rooms, and summoned as they were wanted. When Aunt Jerry's name was called, nobody answered to it for some minutes. The judge waxed impatient.

"Sheriff," he said, "is not Miss Martin in the court?"

"She is, your honor; but she refuses to take the stand," replied the sheriff.

"Then use compulsion. The court can't be de-

A short struggle ensued, and Aunt Jerry, purple with rage and excitement, was dragged to the stand. But she refused to be sworn until the threats of the judge brought her to reason. Afterward she gave her evidence cheerfully enough until the events of that fatal night were touched upon, and then she became obstinately silent.

"You must answer such questions as the counsel address to you," said the judge, sternly.

"The hard-hearted brute!" cried the excited woman, fairly shrieking with passion. "They ought to be ashamed of themselves, making me swear a fellow-creature's life away! That's queer sort of justice, it seems to me. Your laws are a humbug, and I despise them!"

She was told that her injudicious course only injured the prisoner's cause, and after a deal of trouble such evidence as she had to give was coaxed and wheedled out of her.

The counsel for the defense made an able and ingenious speech, the judge summed up, and about five o'clock the jury retired. They were absent a very short time. The judge arose, amidst the dead silence of the court, and put the usual question.

"How say you, gentlemen of the jury? Is Vincent Erle guilty of the crime laid to his charge, or not guilty?"

The answer came in clear, distinct tones that caused more than one heart to throb with violence:

"Guilty!"

A long, wailing cry rung through the room, and Dolores fell forward on the breast of her doomed husband.

CHAPTER XXVIII. THE MIDNIGHT SUMMONS.

LATE one night a little more than a week subsequent to Ethelind's flight, Colonel Philip Falkner was sitting alone in his study, not reading and not reflecting, but in a dreamy blending of the two, when there came a sharp peal at the door-bell.

John, the only servant up at that late hour, answered the summons. After a brief interval he entered the study, and bowing respectfully, said:

"If you please, sir, there's a woman at the door."

"A woman?" echoed Colonel Falkner, in a tone of surprise. "For whom did she ask?"

"For you, sir. I think it's one of the servants from Lorn."

He rose quickly at the mention of that magic name, and descending the hall, approached the large entrance-door. Joan Withers stood there, clinging to the railing, her yellow, unprepossessing face convulsed with some deep emotion.

"Come," she said, tottering forward a few steps and dropping her hand on Colonel Falkner's arm. "She has sent for you!"

"Do you mean your mistress?"

"Yes. She wishes to see you immediately. It will be enough, she said, to tell you that."

Colonel Falkner felt his heart throb with bewildering joy and excitement. The supreme moment had come! She had sent for him, according to her promise. In his delight he failed to remark Joan's repressed excitement; or to give a second thought to the fact that the summons had come at so unexpectedly an hour.

"Come in," he said, "and my servant shall bring out the carriage at once."

"I cannot wait—we are losing precious time," said Joan, huskily. "We must walk."

She turned to go, as she spoke, and Colonel Falkner caught up his hat, with a chill foreboding of evil, and hurried after her down the steps.

"Tell me what has happened," he said, a little sternly. "Is Mrs. Faunce ill?"

"She would not have sent for you otherwise. But I cannot talk. My heart is too full. Come, let us make haste quickly."

A low moan broke from her lips, and turning into one of the nearest paths, she walked on with an accelerated step. Colonel Falkner followed her in silence, that sick sensation of dread becoming more intensely vivid every moment.

The night was hot and still. No silvery moon was treading its lightsome way through the sky, but the heavens were thickly gemmed with stars that bathed the landscape in a subdued, holy light. Faint flashes of lightning played about the horizon, ever and anon, and the sea broke with a dirge-like music on the gloomy shore.

Not a word was uttered until that night-walk ended, and they were climbing the steps at Lorn. Then Joan's compressed lips parted, a few muttered words falling from them.

"Here we are at last, thank God!"

Lights were flashing here and there in the house, but instead of ringing for admittance, Joan produced a key from some capacious pocket, and in another moment they were traversing a large, dimly-lighted hall from which branched several narrower passages. Turning into one of these latter, Joan paused before a door that stood slightly ajar.

"Remain here a few moments," she said, briefly, and pausing opened the door, and entered by herself the room beyond.

Colonel Falkner's sense of hearing seemed to be preternaturally acute, or else the profound stillness of midnight it was that brought out the slightest sound. At any rate his quick ear caught a rustling movement, a suppressed cry, and then a low voice said eagerly:

"Oh, Joan, tell me quickly, did he come?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Thank God! thank God! Where did you leave him?"

"Hush!" came the warning whisper. There was a brief silence, and then the woman, who seemed to possess considerable influence with her mistress, said in a tone of vehement remonstrance:

"Surely, madam, you will permit me to prepare Colonel Falkner for what he is to see before admitting him to your presence!"

"Prepare him?"

"Yes. It will be a great shock, a terrible surprise. You know what I mean. For his sake, as well as your own, I ask your permission to offer a brief explanation before you meet face to face."

"It cannot be. You are a meddlesome idiot, Joan. Get this instant, and admit him."

Joan breathed a heavy sigh, but with a slow, lagging step she returned to the passage where Colonel Falkner waited, pale and trembling.

"You can enter," she said. "But be careful how you agitate my mistress. It is very hazardous for her to see you at all in her present condition; but she would not be dissuaded from her purpose."

She stood aside, and beckoned for him to go in. Strange indeed were the conflicting emotions with which he crossed the threshold. The tones of that voice relieved of all attempt at disguise, as heard in expostulation with Joan, had half-revealed the truth to him—a truth so strange, startling and horrible that his shocked mind refused to grasp it.

The spacious room was lighted with wax candles placed in silver sconces on marble stands and on elaborately-carved brackets that adorned the walls. If it had seemed chaste and elegant in the garish light of day, this pearly, subdued brilliancy made it infinitely more so.

On a silken divan near the open window, reclined the mistress of all this splendor. She wore a flowing white wrapper that contrasted strongly with the funeral garments in which she usually arrayed herself. The muffling black veil was gone, but as Colonel Falkner stole forward she uttered a strange sound, half-sob, half-scream, and covered her face with her hands.

"At last! at last!" she cried.

He stood beside her a moment without speaking, but he saw that she trembled like one under the spell of some deadly fear.

"You sent for me, Mrs. Faunce," he said at length, controlling himself with an effort, "and I am here."

"Oh, God, be merciful to me a sinner!"

The words seemed to break from her lips involuntarily. Were they a plaint to Heaven, or meant to win human compassion as well as divine mercy.

A dreadful, sickening suspicion caused Colonel Falkner's brain to whirl as he leant over her and said, in the suppressed accents of deep emotion:

"Look up! Tell me, Mrs. Faunce, what can I do to help you?"

"I dare not! I dare not!" she shivered, still keeping her face hidden in her hands.

"Do you mean that you are afraid to meet my eyes?"

"Yes, yes."

"I thought the time had come when you'd be pleasure to trust me fully."

"I also believed. Oh, with what deathful longing have I looked forward to this hour! And now that it is come my courage fails me. I can only tremble! I can only fear! I can only hide my face in shame! Oh, merciful God, why have you forsaken me?"

She groaned, and her whole figure seemed to writhe with agony. While Colonel Falkner still stood looking down at her, with strange intentness, he saw blood spurt suddenly from between her half-closed fingers. She turned her face to the wall.

"Call Joan," she said in a faint voice, before he had recovered sufficiently to speak at all. "My servant will know what to do for me."

It was unnecessary. Joan stood at that moment at his elbow, her yellow face gnashingly white.

"You've killed her!—I knew you would!" she fiercely exclaimed, pushing him away from the couch, and leaning apprehensively above her mistress.

There was a silence. While it lasted Joan seemed to be engaged in wiping away the flow of blood; but she stood with her back to Colonel Falkner, between him and the couch. At length she looked round and said, briefly:

"Send the physician here—he is waiting in the room just across the passage. Go, and do not return again."

She spoke in a tone of authority to which he yielded instinctive obedience. Hurrying to the apartment in question, he found a man past the middle age—not Dr. Lance, but a stranger—sitting there, reading a newspaper and at the same time sipping a cup of fragrant Mocha, while a tray of refreshments stood on a small table at his elbow.

Half a dozen words sufficed to acquaint this man (he was evidently a physician who had been hastily summoned from the city) with the emergency. He rose at once and proceeded to the apartment where Mrs. Faunce was lying.

Left alone, Colonel Falkner paced the floor in an anguish of mind that cannot be described. He felt that at last he had a clew to the mystery that had so perplexed himself and baffled the curiosity of others. But now that he guessed somewhat at of the truth, he shrunk with a sick feeling of horror from learning more: and yet, strange contradiction, all the riches of Golconda would not have tempted him to forego the opportunity of knowing all. Until he did, rest and peace must remain strangers to his tortured soul.

A long, endless hour wore on, and at length Joan looked in at the door. The expression of deadly fear was gone from her countenance, but it had left a cloud behind it, and her brows were sternly contracted.

"How is your patient?" Colonel Falkner asked stepping forward.

"Better," was the brief reply.

"Can I see her?"

"Not to-night. She lacks strength to sustain an interview. She desired me to invite you to come again at twelve, to-morrow morning."

"Does the physician consider her situation critical?"

"There is no immediate danger. She has had hemorrhage of the lungs. But I will show you out, if you please, sir."

He followed her reluctantly, and as the old woman locked the house door behind him, she muttered, audibly:

"Would that I might never be asked to open to you again!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

"RESURGAM."

PUNCTUAL to the moment Colonel Falkner stood on the steps at Lorn, the next morning, just as some distant clock was chiming the hour of twelve.

Phoebe Jelly admitted him. The girl stood holding the door half-open a moment and looked intently into his face.

"I'm glad you've come, sir," she whispered.

"How is your mistress?"

"She seems easier this morning." There was a moment's silence, and then, bending nearer, she laid her hand on his shoulder.

"I've seen her face," she breathed, sinking her voice still lower, and glancing furtively all round. "Such a countenance! It might belong to an angel. Oh, you don't know how surprised and relieved I was!"

"Surprised? Relieved?" he echoed, not in the least comprehending the drift of her remarks.

"That I was, sir. I may as well be frank with you. I had my doubts of Mrs. Faunce's motive in always wearing that horrid black veil. There's no harm, I am sure, in telling this now."

Colonel Falkner made an impatient gesture, but her gossiping tongue was not to be silenced so easily.

"It's natural, sir, that a pretty woman should wish to reveal her beauty for all the world to admire. Mrs. Faunce is the first exception to the rule I ever knew. Such a lovely, lovely face! Not a spot or blemish to mar its perfection! The sight of it fairly took my breath away. I am more puzzled than ever. Why she should wish to screen it behind so much ugly gauze quite passes my comprehension."

Colonel Falkner's brows contracted slightly. Did he, or did he not, possess a clew to the mystery?

"I felt confident that my lady's face must be hideous with pock-marks, or scars, or malformations of some sort," Phoebe went on. "It gave me quite a start when I saw how pure and sweet and perfect it was, like the dimpled flesh of a lovely child."

"When did you see it for the first time?" Colonel Falkner could not resist the impulse to ask.

"This morning, sir. Since my lady's illness, they have been less cautious than usual. I have been waiting ever since I came here for an opportunity to gratify my curiosity. An hour ago I followed Joan softly to the door. It was not closed perfectly, and I peeped through the crack. There sat Mrs. Faunce, looking so strangely like a saint just descended from heaven that I almost screamed with delight."

"The only saintliness of her nature lies in her expression, I fear," muttered the colonel.

Phoebe failed to catch the softly-muttered words.

"I suspect that you know no more than I of Mrs. Faunce's real appearance," she said, holding open the door for him to pass through. "But you can go on without a misgiving. Any queen in Christendom would barter her crown for such a face."

Colonel Falkner stepped into the hall, and was crossing it, when he turned back again, as if struck by a sudden thought.

"Is it true," he said, "that Mrs. Faunce has screened her features from the scrutiny of her own household as carefully and successfully as from the outside world?"

"Old Joan is the only one of our number who ever saw her unveiled before to-day. When she fell sick she sent to New York for a physician instead of employing one nearer home—one who might have gossiped of her abroad. Oh, sir, whatever the nature of her secret, she has guarded it well."

"And you must guard it just as carefully," said Colonel Falkner, in a low, stern voice. "The caprices of your mistress are not to be talked about even among your fellow-servants. I hope you understand this. It would be the height of ingratitude to betray her."

Phoebe seemed considerably impressed by his earnestness.

"Oh, sir," she said, shivering a little, "I should never dream of making trouble for her."

"Then take care that you do not canvas her affairs with another as freely as you have done with me."

Leaving Phoebe this caution to ponder by herself, he passed on quickly to the door of the apartment in which he had found the mistress of Lorn the night before, and knocked lightly. It was opened by Joan, who signed grimly for him to enter, and then slipped past, and disappeared.

Colonel Falkner advanced with a wildly-throbbing heart. He caught a glimpse of a woman's figure that was reclining in a spacious invalid chair, and knew it was she he had come to meet. But some seconds elapsed before he could bring himself to look her fully in the face.

She broke the oppressive silence herself. Stretching out her trembling hand, she breathed his name in a husky whisper.

"Philip!"

He made no answer in words, but a shudder shook his frame.

"Philip," she repeated, in accents of pleading pathos, "do you not see that I am restored to you?"

"My God!" he groaned. "What can restore the dead?"

"Look at me! I am a living, breathing reality like yourself."

"I do not wish to believe it."

"Touch my hand. It will cling to yours with a very earthly pressure."

He groaned and covered his face.

"They told me you were dead, Olympia. I saw you lying in your coffin, and that coffin consigned to its last resting-place."

"So you believed them. Everybody was deceived save a few faithful friends whom I was compelled to trust with my secret."

He sunk down on a chair, and compelled himself to look at her. But the cold dew broke over his marble forehead as he did so. Never in all his life had he been so moved, so agitated.

She was attired in the simple white cambric wrapper she had worn on the occasion of his former visit. The simplicity of her dress seemed to add to her marvelous loveliness, however, rather than detract from it. The pale, clear, oval face, the deep, lustrous black eyes, the mobile mouth, the heavy bands of purplish hair, smooth and glossy as satin, drawn back from the broad, low brow, were features too deeply engraved on Colonel Falkner's heart ever to be forgotten.

She had rallied from the prostration of the night before with the wonderful recuperative power often manifested by persons suffering from lung trouble. She was still weak and pale, and unable to leave her chair unassisted, but every look and movement betrayed a latent nervous strength that could not be easily overcome.

"Philip, why don't you speak to me?" she cried, with low-toned eagerness, once more stretching out her hands to him. "Speak, I implore you!"

He only stared at her in that cold bewildered way, like a frozen man.

She groaned out—her hands fell in her lap again.

"I see how it is," she murmured. "This meeting has been a greater shock than you could bear. I should have seen that you were prepared for it. Joan was wiser than I when she warned me."

"You are mistaken," he said, in hollow accents. "Before entering this room I guessed who it was I had come to meet. It seemed impossible—and yet something in my soul told me it was even you."

"And this is the manner in which you meet me? Oh, Philip!"

"What would you?" he demanded, fiercely.

"I believed you would at least have loving words and tender looks for me."

"Impossible!"

She leaned toward him, the breath running icily cold over her lips.

"Has all the love you once professed died out of your heart?" she asked.

"Yes. Only ashes are left."

"Oh, my God!" she wailed. "It would have been better if I had died when you believed I did!"

"Yes," he said, grimly. "For, in spite of the bitter past, your memory was still dear to me. I thought of you in the grave far more tenderly and compassionately than I can think of you living."

"Is this true, Philip? And I—oh, Heaven pity me—I am perishing for your love!"

She covered her face and gave way to a burst of dry sobs that shook her from head to foot.

"Be calm, Olympia. It is dangerous to agitate yourself like this."

"I no longer desire to live. Why should I, since you have turned against me?" she cried, passionately.

"Why did you ever come here?"

"That is an idle question. But since you have seen fit to ask, I will answer it. I came because I wished to be near you."

He made an impatient gesture.

"It was madness—folly. But since you must come, why did you hide yourself under a false name and in a masquerading costume?"

"That inquiry is worse than the other," she said, bitterly. "You know as well as I do what would have been the result had I presented myself boldly in the face of the world."

He shuddered and was silent.

"My eyes have been on you when you knew it not, Philip. I wished to study your mood before declaring myself even to you. How could I tell whether your love had survived the awful test to which it was put?"

She raised her beseeching eyes as if trying to read his very soul. The face upon which she gazed was cold and marble white.

"Oh, my love! my love!" she cried, clinching her hands in anguish. "You have no pity, no compassion. You suffer the pass to rise up before us like a wall. You seem to think of me only as a guilty woman."

"Could I, in the nature of things, think of you otherwise?"

"At least you might be more forgiving. I could overlook any sin, any crime you might have committed and cling to you in spite of it."

"I tried to forget your guilt when I believed that the grave covered it. But now it rises up as Gorgon-headed as ever."

He moved slowly toward the door when he had spoken, as if anxious to end the interview.

"You are not going, Philip? You will not leave me thus?"

"I must. This scene is inexpressibly painful to us both. It is better, for your own sake, to end it quickly."

"You will not betray me!" she panted.

A cold smile of disdain curled his lip.

"The question was unnecessary. I thought you knew me better. You have nothing to fear from me."

She rose as if to follow him, then fell back again, half-fainting.

"Are you implacable?" she cried. "Will nothing move you—not even the sight of my suffering?"

"I cannot forget," he answered, but there was a lurking tenderness in his tone.

"This must not be a final parting. I will not have it so. I have more to say to you—I have told you nothing, as yet, of the past that is such a fount of bitterness to us both. And there are many things that ought to be explained. Come again to-morrow at this hour. Promise me that you will. You must—you shall!"

"Very well," he said, after a brief silence. "Since you so earnestly request it, I will come. But do not hope to change my fixed determination."

And without a word of farewell he left the room.

CHAPTER XXX.

"HELP THOU MY UNBELIEF."

THE afternoon was fast waning when Colonel Falkner reached Glenoaks on his return. He climbed the steps with a weary, listless air, for the scenes in which he had been an actor had left him with an old, worn, tired feeling that was singularly depressing.

He had scarcely crossed the threshold of the house when a gentleman suddenly came out of the drawing-room and advanced to meet him. It was Raymond Challoner. He started slightly when he recognized his guest, for Raymond had been absent ever since Ethelind's flight, hunting for his runaway bride, and he was not expecting him.

"Have you found her?" he asked, with abrupt eagerness, as they shook hands.

Raymond's brow clouded over.

"No," he answered, half sullenly. "Not even a clew has been discovered."

"What have you done?"

"You might rather ask what I have left undone," said Raymond, in a bitter tone. "The whole country round has been scouried. That mad girl has been culling as the devil in her flight."

Colonel Falkner shuddered at the vehemence with which these words were uttered. It betrayed a depth of repressed passion absolutely appalling.

"I have been to New York and Philadelphia, and set the police at work in both cities," the young man added. "But they have accomplished nothing."

"I hope you cautioned them to press their inquiries as secretly as possible."

"Why should I?"

"Ethelind's nature is a sensitive one. She would never recover from the shame of feeling that she had been the object of such surveillance."

A derisive laugh broke from Raymond's lips.

"I do not feel bound to consider her feelings in that respect. Has she not overwhelmed us all with a shameful notoriety by her own mad act?"

"True—true!"

"I shall not be deterred by the necessity of her folly more generally known ready, from using every exertion to place of refuge—be assured of that."

"When you have found her—what then?" Colonel Falkner inquired, a little coldly.

"She is welcome to elude me a second time—if she can!"

He showed his dazzlingly white teeth for a moment; then turned quickly away as if not trusting himself to say more.

Colonel Falkner believed he would go away again the next morning; but Raymond seemed to have no such intention. He sat in the study with his host through all the earlier hours of the day, saying little; but ever and anon Colonel Falkner would meet those brilliant black eyes fixed upon himself in a strange, intense scrutiny. What did it mean? The colonel grew uneasy, he scarcely knew why.

Rising abruptly, when the hour came for him to set out for Lorn to keep his appointment with Mrs. Faunce, Colonel Falkner excused himself with a few cold words, and after having made some slight changes in his toilet, left the house.

Great was his surprise, then, as he was crossing a bit of open lawn in front of Lorn, to see Raymond suddenly emerge from the shrubbery less than half a dozen rods distant and come forward bowing and smiling.

"Why did you follow me?" he demanded, the inquiry being half involuntary.

"Follow you?" Raymond echoed, in accents of well-feigned amazement. "I did not follow you. We happen both to be of the same mind about visiting Mrs. Faunce."

"You must have guessed my intention."

"No, I did not," was the answer, but it failed to carry conviction to the mind of the listener.

"Some one of the servants must have told Raymond of my visits here," he thought.

Aloud he said in a rather haughty tone:

"I did not know that you were a friend of Mrs. Faunce's."

"Oh, yes," Raymond replied, with affected carelessness. "I have been here before. And now, if you please, we will enter together and pay our respects to the fair mistress of Lorn."

Springing lightly up the steps, he rang the bell with his own hand. Some minutes elapsed before any notice was taken of the summons. Colonel Falkner, clinging to the railing with a cold, uneasy sensation at his heart, had almost decided to turn away and wait until he should be free to come again

by himself when the door unclosed a few inches and Joan's ugly yellow face was thrust out.

"You can come in, Colonel Falkner," she said.

"My mistress expects you."

Raymond would have followed him into the house, had not the old woman planted herself right in the doorway.

"Not you," she said, sharply, waving him back.

"You are not wanted here."

"This is very discourteous," said the young man.

"Why am I turned away when Colonel Falkner is admitted?"

"I do but obey my lady's orders."

"Let me stand in the hall while you speak to Mrs. Faunce," urged Raymond. "I am certain she would grant me an interview."

She is too ill to be seen by any save her most intimate friends."

Joan shut the door in his face, and bolted it. When she turned to lead the way down the hall Colonel Falkner saw that she was trembling with excitement.

He found Mrs. Faunce crouching in her invalid-chair. As he approached, she put out her hands and clung to him in a sort of terror.

"Never, never bring that dreadful man here again," she panted.

"I did not bring him, Olympia."

"Why, then, did he come?"

"He said he was your friend."

"My friend?" Her voice was husky, and she looked up at him with an awful dread in her widen eyes. "God in Heaven! What fatal revelation have you made to him?"

"None," Colonel Falkner answered, wondering greatly at her agitation and terror. "If I felt any temptation to reveal your cherished secret—and I do not—Raymond Challoner is the last man I should choose for my confidant."

"He knows me only as Mrs. Faunce?"

"Such is my belief. It was idle curiosity no doubt, that brought him here to-day."

She drew a deep breath—evidently of relief.

"Keep him away, Philip—keep him away, if you ever loved me. I cannot, will not, see him."

"But why should poor Raymond inspire you with such dread?"

"I am afraid of everybody," she answered, still trembling. "It is but natural, after all I have suffered. The mere sight of a strange face is enough to throw me into convulsions."

A long silence followed, and gradually she grew more calm.

"I feel that your heart must have softened toward me, or you would not have come again so soon," she said, at length, her voice trembling nervously. "Oh, Philip, nothing should have had power to divide you and me."

"Not even sin?" he said, huskily.

"Do not bring up the past again. I implore you. It is too dreadful. I meant to have told you all at this interview, but my heart sickens at the ordeal. I have not the strength for such a disclosure. Spare me."

"Yes, I will spare us both a pain that would be of no avail."

She suddenly stretched forth both her hands and clasped his tightly.

"Have you lost all faith in me, Philip? Do you believe I am the guilty creature my foes would make me out?"

"I do not wish to believe it."

"Oh thank you, thank you."

"For a time I would not cherish the shadow of a doubt. No eager worshiper ever desired to believe in his God more earnestly than I desired to believe in you. Oh, it was a bitter moment when conviction pierced my soul."

"Appearances were against me—I own that. It is no wonder, perhaps, that your faith went down, crushed under the overwhelming mass of evidence with which you were confronted. And I, alas, could not come to you and dispel the doubts that did me such bitter wrong."

There was a subdued wail in her voice that affected him far more deeply than the uttered words. The old spell with which this woman had once infatuated him grew strong again, in spite of reason and suspicion.

She seemed to divine the terrible struggle going on in his mind. Leaning toward him she said, in an eager whisper:

"Only trust me, Philip. I will never deceive you!"

I could not. Trust me."

He raised his hands to his lips, then let them fall again, nevertheless. Cold beads of perspiration stood on his forehead.

"My physician says that I must die, dear love. But I shall not. We have known very little happiness, you and I. God will not take me away until we have tasted the heavenly bliss that even this life can give."

Her head fell against his shoulder. Her brilliant, alluring eyes looked into his. There could be no doubt but that she loved him with an intensity of passion such as only erratic natures like hers can feel.

Singularly enough, the pale pure face of Ethelind Erle rose, at this moment, before his mental vision. She, too, had loved him, but with that tender, true, abiding love in which one finds calm content and peace. How different the one sentiment was from the other—as different as volcanic fires from the cheery glow one kindles on the hearth-stone.

Sighing deeply, he put the thought of Ethelind away. She was Raymond's wife—he had no right to claim her even in his secret musings. Besides, had he not scorned her love when the opportunity to foster it had been his?

"Philip, pity me!"

The sound of that voice roused him. Clasping his arms round her, he cried:

"I have suffered too deeply to struggle now. I will believe that all the world is false, and you alone are true. Oh, help thou my unbelief!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE APPEAL.

The beams of the descending sun, struggling through the iron bars of the prison window, shone yellow and calm into the cell where Vincent Erle and his wife were sitting.

The face of the prisoner looked haggard and worn. Several days had elapsed since the trial, and already sentence of death had been passed upon him.

The fearful doom staring the poor fellow in the face had deprived him of courage and manhood. Instead of cheering Dolores, as he had done at first, it was she who sought to comfort and sustain him. The men and women had changed places for the time.

"To die a shameful death on the scaffold—it is too dreadful!" Vincent groaned, shivering with misery.

"I cannot think of such a fate and be calm."

Dolores tried to say something. But words of encouragement in a case like this are not easily forced to the lips. She could only clasp his hand and cover it with her tears.

"I am not a coward," he went on, in a low, hoarse voice. "It is not death itself that I fear. But to be hung—to be ushered suddenly into the other world—to be made a spectacle for a gaping crowd—oh, how can I meet such a fate with fortitude?"

Dolores tried to calm herself, and said:

"If you perish on the scaffold it will be as a martyr—not as a culprit. Let that thought give you courage."

"Oh, dear!" groaned the unhappy man. "I feel myself most unjustly dealt with."

The full passion of his despair broke forth again.

When the terrible storm had spent itself, he turned once more to his wife, and gazed into her eyes with sorrowful earnestness.

"Do not let them hang me, darling," he whispered. "Circumstances compel me to test your love as I never tested it yet. Oh, be true to me now, Dolores. When the end draws nigh, and we see

there is no longer any hope of deliverance, bring me the means of escaping that public, disgraceful death I dread, and even in my grave I will bless you."

The heartbroken wife could not mistake his meaning. She leaned her head on his bosom with a groan that came from the lowest depths of her soul.

"If it comes to that we will die together," she said, in the shrill accents of despair. "It is very wicked to think of such a thing, but perhaps God will forgive us. At least I hope He will—"

She was interrupted by the sudden grating of a key in the lock, and the opening of the door. An instant later the warden ushered in Aunt Jerry.

The woman's face was deadly pale as she advanced, and in one hand she clutched a roll of paper. She looked like a person who had nerved herself to make a sacrifice that was costing her dear.

"How good of you to come!" said Dolores, springing to her feet, and trembling with surprise and pleasure.

Vincent put forth his hand in greeting. Aunt Jerry did not take it, but on her face came an odd look, a blending of pity and abhorrence.

"Do not approach me," she said, waving him back, and retreating herself toward the door. "I nerved myself to come here because Dolores's burden of grief lies heavily on my own heart. For her sake I am willing to forgive offenses that, in themselves, are unpardonable."

"I know what you mean," cried Vincent, in deep agitation. "Oh, what shall I say or do to convince you of my innocence?"

"Nothing."

Her voice was cold and hard, and she made an impatient gesture, as if forbidding him to pursue the topic.

"During the days that have elapsed since your trial, I have been working for you, though you knew it not," she went on, abruptly. "Here is the result of my labors. Remember, however, that I have done all this for the sake of Dolores—not from any love for you."

She held out, at arm's length, the roll of paper she carried, and when Vincent had taken and opened it he discovered, to his amazement, that it was a petition for pardon, signed by many friends, Aunt Jerry's own name leading all the rest.

"May Heaven bless and reward you, Aunt Jerry!" said Dolores, her eyes filling with tears as she glanced over her husband's shoulder and learned the object of the paper. "I had not thought of a petition. But it is the best step we can take."

"It will fail," said Vincent, gloomily.

"No; I will myself bear it to the Governor. My tears and prayers will certainly move him."

"I shall go with you," said Aunt Jerry.

"Our trust is in God."

Vincent said nothing, but his heart was full. Early the next morning, Dolores and Aunt Jerry set out on their journey. The capital was only forty miles distant, and as it was situated on the same railroad line, at eleven o'clock they were standing on the steps of the Governor's handsome mansion. The heart of Dolores almost failed her now that the ordeal was so near.

"Oh, Aunt Jerry!" she gasped. "what if we should fail? I would rather die than be the one to take the dreadful truth back to Vincent."

"Our failure will not make your husband's condition any worse than it is now. Think of that, child, and be calm."

They were ushered into a spacious parlor, and after a brief delay the Governor made his appearance. He was a tall, rather portly man, with a kind, handsome face that pleased and attracted Dolores at once.

"What is your pleasure?" he said, smiling invitingly when he had shaken hands with them both, and seated himself at a little distance.

Dolores could not speak. She tottered forward, laid the petition before him, and silently indicated that he was to read it.

An expression of pity for her evident agitation crossed that genial face, but he immediately commenced the perusal of the document. She saw him start suddenly, and bite his lips when he first comprehended its purport; but he read on to the end without a comment.

"My servant did not announce your names," he said at length, laying down the petition, and once more confronting his guests.

"I am the wife of the prisoner," said Dolores, a trembling in her sweet voice.

"Ah! You have my heartfelt sympathy, madam."

"And I," said Aunt Jerry, speaking clearly and distinctly, "am the woman who loved the murdered man better than any one else."

The Governor looked curiously into that homely and rugged face. He seemed touched in an unusual degree.

"And yet you have come here to plead for the assassin's life," he uttered.

"Yes, I have forgiven him. Do thou likewise."

A heavy sigh broke from his lips.

"I wish I could. I have carefully read and sifted the newspaper reports relating to this trial. It is an unusually aggravated case. There is not even the excuse of sudden passion; the deed appears to have been the cool, deliberate act of an assassin."

Dolores felt the blood slowly congeal round her heart. She threw herself at his feet, clasping and wringing her pale little hands.

"Be merciful—be compassionate!" she whispered, hoarsely. "Oh, think of the day when you yourself will be crying out for pardon! A precious human life can be blotted out of existence at your nod. Oh, spare my husband as you hope to be spared yourself! He is innocent."

"Ah, if I only believed that, it would be easy indeed to pardon him!"

"I, his wife, tell you he is innocent. You must believe me!"

The Governor turned away his face, which was twitching convulsively.

"Poor child!—poor, deluded child!" he murmured.

"You will hear me?" Dolores cried wildly. "You cannot suffer this appeal to be made in vain! Remember, it is a wife pleading for the life of her husband. You cannot send me away broken-hearted. It is not in your nature. You do pity me—you will relent—you will pardon Vincent—you will restore happiness and peace to our sorrowing lives—you will give us years of contentment in which to repay one great act of leniency—oh, say that you will do all this, and—"

Her voice died away in a cry of bitter anguish. The Governor seemed well-nigh overcome, but he resolutely put forth his hand to lift her up.

"Rise," he said, half sternly. "If I could help you, you would not need to put in such a passionate plea. But I must not transcend the privileges of my office, no matter how deeply my sympathies as a man may be enlisted. Vincent Erle has forfeited his life to the laws of his country. It is not for me to step between him and the rightful retribution he has brought upon his own head."

There was that in his tone which told Dolores how useless it would be to prolong the interview. The room reeled around her as she rose, tottered a few steps toward Aunt Jerry, and fell forward half-fainting in the arms of the woman, down whose cheeks unwanted tears were falling like rain.

The prison was closed for the night when they returned from their unsuccessful mission; but the next morning Dolores, with languid, lingering steps, made her way to the cell of her husband.

He was not alone. Two or three men were in the dreary place, and in one of them she recognized the sheriff. He held an open paper in his hand.

Vincent sent one swift, startled glance into the face of his wife, and though he read his doom there, not a single groan burst from his lips. Coming forward, he said hastily:

"Pray retire for a few moments, my dear love. These gentlemen have business matters to transact with me. You can come in again when they are gone."

But a terrible conviction as to the nature of that "business" had already struck home to Dolores's heart. She sank down, pale and faint, on the nearest chair.

"Let me remain," she whispered, taking her husband's hand and clinging to it convulsively. "I know what is coming. If you can bear the ordeal, I shall not shrink from it."

He could not say another word. While the husband and wife sat with their arms locked round each other and looking into each other's eyes for comfort and encouragement, the sheriff proceeded, in clear, distinct tones, to read the warrant for Vincent's execution.

CHAPTER XXXII.

IN THE BACK STREET.

It was past ten o'clock one dark, stormy night, and Matthew Pussy and his daughter Emily, supernumeraries in one of the New York theaters, were returning home, and had nearly reached the dilapidated tenement-house in which their wretched stipend of a few shillings per night insured to them

two cramped, stuffy back rooms as the best substitute for a home within their means, when they stumbled and almost fell across some object lying directly in the way.

"Good Lord! Em'ly, it's a woman!" cried Matthew, as he bent down to learn the nature of the obstruction.

"Oh, no, father."

"Yes, it is, child. Drunk, I reckon. Poor critter! I see lots of such cases. They takes to drink nat'r'nal like, when they once get into trouble. It's their only solace."

"What shall we do with her, father?" said Emily, compassionately clasping one of the cold little hands in both her own.

"We can't leave her here. She might be trampled to death before morning. I'll just take her inside our own door, and go for a policeman."

It was an easy matter for big, burly Matthew Puffy to lift that slight figure in his brawny arms and bear it to the dingy, smoke-begrimed hall, a few yards further on, that gave ingress to his own humble quarters. Emily followed, tears of pity in her modest blue eyes, and when her father had deposited his burden on one of the dilapidated steps that led to the upper stories, it was she who bent over her with a womanly longing to be of service to the poor night wanderer.

"Why, father, this is a fainting-fit," she suddenly exclaimed. "The poor soul must have fallen down from exhaustion. Do look at her! I never saw such a sweet face; it is like an angel's."

Matthew himself was quite amazed now that he had a better view of the person he had succored. The street-lamp nearest his door was out, and when he lifted the woman up he did not know whether she was young or old, handsome or ugly. But now that the flickering light from an old lantern that hung aloft fell upon her face, he was as greatly startled at its beauty as Emily seemed to be.

"Bless me, Em'ly, I do believe she's a lady," he said.

"Of course she is, father. Look at her dress. It's plain and neat, but I never owned one half so fine. And there are real gold rings on her fingers."

"She's certainly a lady or—"

Emily's plump little hand suddenly stopped his mouth, and she frowned—very severely for her.

"Hush, father. You shall not say it. That face is good and pure, and I am going to do for the poor lady what I should wish her to do for me in a similar trouble. Please, father, help me take her upstairs to my own little room. She shall not lodge in the station-house to-night, whatever betide."

Matthew's heart was as soft as his daughter's; and five minutes later the stranger was lying on a poor but clean bed, in a seven-by-nine room, and Emily was employing all the simple remedies at her command to recall the wandering spirit.

At length the woman slowly unclosed her eyes, and an expression of agony crossed her waxen face. "Save me!" she cried, wildly. "I can't go back. I would rather die."

"We are your friends. There's nothing to be afraid of here," said Emily, trying to soothe her.

"Thank God!"

There was a moment's silence. Then the woman began to move and moan as if in pain; and after a little, to babble to herself.

"Poor thing," said Emily, stepping into the next room, where her father sat. "She's delirious with fever. You'll have to fetch a doctor."

Matthew rose, without a word, and went out. Though poor as the proverbial church mouse himself, he did not for one moment dream of sending the strange woman to a hospital, or thrusting her into the street. A long acquaintance with privation had left his heart tender and pitiful for all who suffered.

For several days the beautiful stranger remained wholly unconscious of the kind and friendly faces that hovered above her couch. But at last there came a morning when she awoke from a refreshing sleep and looked at the patient Emily with a gleam of intelligence in her eyes.

"Have I been ill?" she asked.

"Yes," said Emily, trembling with delight that her *prol-gee* was at last rational. "But you are better, thank God."

"Where am I?"

"With friends, dear lady. Never mind now. My father and I will take care of you."

The large, luminous eyes filled with tears.

"You are very good," she said, in a low voice.

"Heaven will repay you for your kindness to me."

The next morning she was able to converse more freely. When Emily appeared at her bedside, she looked up with a sad, sweet smile and said:

"I must be a great burden to you, dear friend."

"No, not a burden," said Emily, earnestly. "I never had a sister. I'm glad to have you here."

"You seem to be very poor."

"Father and I never go hungry. And we are able to pay the rent for the two rooms we live in. Don't be afraid, dear lady."

"You will find a small package in the dress I had on when you found me. Bring it to me, please."

Emily did as she was requested, and the woman slowly unrolled several new bank-notes and thrust them into the girl's hand.

"I'm not quite penniless," she said, with a pathetic smile. "Take the money and use it freely."

"Have you no friends for whom you wish us to send?" asked Emily, laying the notes down on the window-ledge as if she did not like to touch or even look at them.

"None," was the mournful answer.

"What is your name?"

"I will tell you because you are so good and kind to me. But you must never repeat it—I wish to re-

main unknown. I have run away from my friends and home. My name is Ethelind Erie."

"It is a pretty name."

"Did you ever hear it before?" asked Ethelind, anxiously.

"Never."

"I am glad of that. You may tell your father—he is too good to betray me. But nobody else is to know."

As Ethelind's health and strength returned, she gradually confided to Emily fragments of her history until the whole mournful story had been told.

The night of her flight from Glenoaks, Ethelind had gone directly to the cottage of a fisherman on the beach—a poor man she had once befriended. Exacting from him a solemn promise never to betray her, she had persuaded him to take her several miles down the bay, in his sail-boat, and put her on board a small trading-vessel bound for New York.

Afterward, she had wandered aimlessly up and down the streets, ill, friendless, and despairing, until she had fallen down in a deadly swoon where Matthew and Emily found her.

The building in which father and daughter found a home was a rambling old tenement-house that had once been a tavern. Now, fully a score of families, besides some single lodgers, found a shelter beneath its roof. The poor, having little liberty of choice in their surroundings, are often compelled to huddle together—God help them!—where crime and poverty, guilt and innocence, jostle each other rudely.

One day when Ethelind was so far recovered as to be able to sit up and move around again, she was alone in the poor little sitting-room—which was also Matthew's bedchamber, where he slept on a rude settle before the fire—when a cautious step descending the attic stairs, suddenly aroused her.

Emily and her father had gone out to the morning rehearsal of the new extravaganza. The room-door stood slightly ajar, and impelled by an impulse she could not control, Ethelind hurried to it and looked out.

A woman's figure was creeping stealthily along the landing. Hearing Ethelind's light step, she paused, flung her shawl quickly over her head, and retreated, uttering a long, suppressed cry that was almost a shriek.

Ethelind sat down, pale and trembling. A strange, sudden suspicion made her brain whirl and her heart bound. She felt a premonition that she had not seen the last of the strange woman; so she drew her chair close to the door, and sat there watching and waiting.

Sure enough, an hour later she heard the same stealthy step descending from the attic. This time the woman was closely veiled. Ethelind waited until she was nearly opposite the door, then, darting out, caught hold of her dress.

"Madam Zoe, what are you doing here?" she sternly demanded.

The woman attempted to beat off her clinging hands; but failing in this, she leaned helplessly against the wall, a bitter groan breaking from her lips.

"Oh, God! something told me I should be found out at last!"

"You are Madam Zoe?"

As there was no reply vouchsafed to the question, Ethelind gently put back the woman's veil. The face upon which she gazed seemed like a marble face, but it was impossible to mistake those handsome features. She had visited Dingle Dell more than once, and knew Madam Zoe perfectly well.

"Tell me what this means," she said, in a stern tone. "What induced you to leave Dingle Dell secretly, the night of the murder, and conceal yourself here?"

A blaze of passion kindled in the woman's eyes.

"I'll tell you nothing," she said, fiercely.

"You mus'," said Ethelind, trembling with excitement. She knew, through the medium of the daily papers, that Vincent had been tried for Egbert Challoner's murder, and convicted. Now, a sudden hope sprung to life in her bosom that the woman could throw some light on this terrible affair that would mitigate his sentence, and perchance open the prison doors to him.

"You sh'll speak!" she passionately exclaimed. "My brother's life hangs in the balance, and I am fully persuaded that you concealed yourself here to avoid giving evidence that you wished, for some reason to suppress."

Madam Zoe wrung her hands convulsively, her face, if possible, turning paler than before.

"Let me alone," she said. "I have done you no harm. Let me go away in peace."

"Not until you have cleared my brother!"

"Fool!" hissed Madam Zoe between her teeth.

"You know not what you ask!"

"I do know—an innocent man's life. If you let him die you are a murderer."

The words, though spoken almost at random, produced a strange impression on the woman. She dropped her head upon her breast, heavily groaning.

"My God!" she said "my God! I wish I had died that fatal night! Existence has been a burden to me ever since. If God is merciful, why don't he strike me dead and put me out of my misery?"

"Confess the truth!"

"I won't! I never will! Even the rack could not force it from my lips."

"My brother? Is he not innocent? Tell me that!" said Ethelind, in the wild accents of agonized entreaty.

"Yes, he is innocent," said the woman, with a sudden touch of tenderness, as she looked into that working face. "I know he is innocent."

"Thank God!"

Ethelind tried to say more, but only gasped hoarsely while a dimness came before her eyes.

Retreating to the little sitting room she sunk down on a chair; and when she came to herself again, Madam Zoe was gone.

That night, after Emily returned from the theater and they were alone together, Ethelind said to her:

"Do you know that singular-looking woman who occupies one of the attic-rooms?"

"I have met her once or twice on the stairs," Emily replied. "But I never learned her name—"

"How long has she been here?"

"Several weeks."

"Has she any friends in the house?"

"Not one" said Emily. "She shuns all society, remaining secluded in her own room. Do you know," she added in a whisper, "that I cannot resist the conviction that she is hiding away from something or somebody?"

Ethelind did not reply to the question; but after a short silence, she said:

"Will you go with me, in the morning, to see the woman of whom we have been speaking?"

"Oh, dear! Are you really serious?" cried Emily, in accents of surprise.

"Yes; I have reasons that I will disclose at some future time for preferring the request."

"I don't like the woman. But I will go if you wish."

The next morning early the two young girls picked their way up the steep staircase leading to the attic. Emily knew which room was Madam Zoe's, and knocked at the door. There was no answer. She knocked again. Still no response.

Finally she opened the door and entered. The room was empty, and a few trifling articles lying about, as if left in a hurried flight, told their own story. Madam Zoe had disappeared in the night.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

MRS. FAUNCE.

For a season that strange, erratic woman, the mistress of Lorn, tasted of happiness in feverish draughts that were like nectar to her palate at one moment and bitter as gall the next. Colonel Falkner was at her feet again, the blind, infatuated lover. He had once more fallen completely under the spell of her grace and beauty. The sinful and miserable past, which had been so darkly hinted at in the first interviews they held together, was never referred to now. He preferred to believe blindly and implicitly in her truth, perhaps; for he made no effort to sweep aside the curtain that hid so much that was dark and mysterious.

But Mrs. Faunce could not forget. The sword of Damocles hung suspended above her head, and whether she waked or slept, whether she rejoiced or sorrowed, she never for one moment lost sight of the fact that it was there, as real as reality, though she saw it not. And the consciousness murdered her peace, imbibed her happiest moments, as was most natural, under the circumstances.

One day, when she sat musing in her own room, her graceful hands lying in her lap, her eyes bent upon the carpet, she was suddenly roused from her reverie by the loud ringing of the door-bell.

"It is he—it is Philip," she murmured, a soft rose-flush stealing into her cheeks.

A few minutes later the room door opened and Joan Withers entered—alone. Mrs. Faunce could not repress a cry of disappointment.

"Where is he, Joan? Did he only send a message? Give it to me instantly."

The old woman looked white and scared. "Hush, my lady," she said, in a muffled voice. "It was not Colonel Falkner, but—the other one!"

"What other?"

"Raymond Challoner."

An exclamation of anger and terror broke from the lips of Mrs. Faunce, and she started impulsively to her full height, and stood there with both hands firmly clinched.

"My God!" she gasped, her tone just audible.

"Am I never to know rest or peace?"

"Of course I refused to admit him," said Joan. "But he bade me say to you that even a dozen rebuffs would not discourage him—that he should come again."

"Do you think he suspects—or is it mere idle curiosity that brings him here?"

"The latter, I fully believe," Joan answered, pitying her mistress's evident terror so much that she half-unconsciously belied her real convictions.

"I wish I knew—I wish I knew," moaned Mrs. Faunce, falling back into her chair again, with a dreadful shiver.

The next day, at about the same hour, the bell again sent its imperative summons echoing through the house. But a longer interval elapsed before Joan appeared at the door of the apartment in which Mrs. Faunce sat, pallid with suspense and fear.

"It was he—Mr. Challoner! I know, I feel it!" exclaimed the wretched woman, without waiting for her servant to speak.

"Yes, my lady."

"He intends driving me to madness and desperation. But I will never see him—never!"

Joan hastily advanced.

"He scribbled a few lines on his card, madam, and told me to deliver it immediately. Of course I could not refuse to take it."

The message was written in pencil, and ran thus:

"I have been dismissed from your door for the last time. When I come again to-morrow at this hour, you must admit me. I know you! I am not a man to be trifled with."

An hour later, when Colonel Falkner himself made his appearance at Lorn, he found Mrs. Faunce nervous and hysterical. She screamed at sight of him, and throwing herself helpless on his breast, clung to him in what seemed an agony of terror.

"What has happened?" he asked, in alarm. "Are you ill?"

"Take me away," she shivered. "You have said that you love me. Prove it by helping me to fly from this hated spot."

"Be patient, Olympia," he said, trying to soothe her. "One of these days, as soon as everything is arranged, we will go."

"It must be now or—never!"

"It would necessitate a great pecuniary sacrifice were we to leave at once."

"What do I care for that?" she broke out, fiercely, with her hands clinched. "You shall not forsake me. And it would be wicked and sinful for you to weigh dollars and cents in the balance with my peace of mind."

He looked down at her with a strange glance in which there seemed to be a blending of love and shrinking distrust.

"It is not the loss in money matters that troubles me, and I might as well confess the truth," he said, a little coldly. "You know that my ward Ethelind is missing. I cannot bear to go away until I have heard some tidings of her."

Mrs. Faunce slipped quickly out of his arms and sat down. Her hands were now helplessly relaxed and trembled in her lap.

"You love that girl," she said, in a deep, shaken voice. "She has usurped my place in your heart. I have feared it sometimes—I know it now."

"Hush! you are talking wildly," he said, but his eyes fell beneath the searching gaze she sent quivering into them.

"If you do not love her, why are you so ready to sacrifice my happiness the moment she comes between us?"

"You misunderstand me, Olympia."

"Nay, I fear that I understand you only too well!"

Ethelind was intrusted to my care by her dying father. She has gone away friendless and alone. She may be penniless for aught I know—she certainly is suffering. Is it not natural that I should wish to be assured of her well-being before leaving this part of the country?"

His tone was still cold and reproachful. Mrs. Faunce felt her powerlessness to hold out against him. She suddenly leaned her head against his shoulder and burst into a wild storm of sobs.

"Forgive me, Philip. I did not wish to betray anything akin to jealousy. But I am miserable—too wretched to live. I feel myself sinking into a horrible abyss where I shall be beyond the reach of hope or mercy or pardon; and nobody, not even you is willing to stretch forth a saving hand."

"What do you mean, Olympia?" he said, bending toward her with a touch of returning tenderness. "Why do you talk so strangely? Are you threatened by any new or immediate danger?"

She dared not tell him.

"No one here has penetrated your secret," he went on, in his ignorance. "You might remain at Lorn half a lifetime and not a whisper arise to betray the story of the past. Remember how secluded is this place—how few in all the country have ever heard of you."

"The danger may be more imminent than you are aware," she shivered. "It is impossible to tell. And the world would not judge me with your leniency. It has no faith in me. It would sooner adjudge me guilty than innocent."

"No one would dare breathe a word against you in my presence."

"Oh, Philip, Philip! Promise me that you will never forsake me."

"I do promise—but it is unnecessary. Our lives are too closely woven together ever to be divided again."

She was silent a moment or two, as if struggling with the emotions that had so nearly overcome her. At length, she said, in a thrilling whisper:

"I am like one beset. A nameless horror is hovering over me. I feel as if evil spirits had hold of my soul, and were trying to wrench it from my body. Phillip, unless you save me I am lost—lost to all eternity. Oh, be merciful! Let us fly this very night!"

"So soon?" he said, startled by her wildness and vehemence. "Impossible. Try to be calm, Olympia. There is nothing to fear."

But she went on urging more vehemently than ever that such a course was her only salvation. They would seek some far-off sunny clime, she said, some lovely, romantic isle in a southern sea, where they could live and die together remote from man and the irksome trammels of a false civilization.

Colonel Falkner listened in a vague wonder to her beseeching words. But instead of drawing his heart closer to her they seemed to widen the distance between them. The glowing pictures she painted possessed little charm for him in the mood that had suddenly come over him. He experienced a sickening sensation of misery and disappointment, as if all the brightest hopes of his life had crumbled to ashes in his grasp, like Dead Sea fruit. Were the scales falling from his eyes? Or was this reaction only the natural effect of his better nature trying to reassert itself?

Mrs. Faunce, with a woman's subtle intuitions, divined at once the change in his mood. She became silent all at once, a spasm of agony went over her face, and she sank back in her chair trembling and pallid, as if she had resigned herself to a fate she was powerless to avert.

"You are not yourself to-day," said Colonel Falkner, looking at her curiously. "Something has happened to distress you, and you are keeping it from me."

"No, I am not myself," she said, wearily, utterly ignoring the words with which he had concluded.

"I believe I realize how a poor, doomed prisoner must feel the hour before the executioner comes."

She smiled very faintly, adding, before he could recover himself to reply:

"Perhaps we had better say adieu for the present. You can come again to-morrow—if you wish."

"I shall come very early, then; as early as you will admit me!" he exclaimed, struck by the misery expressed in every tone of her sobbing voice.

"No," she said, firmly, "your visit to-morrow must be paid at a later hour than ever before. Do not come until the sun is down. I shall be busy until then."

She offered no further explanation of the request, but rose quickly and held out her hand. Colonel Falkner took it, held it rather longer than usual, and as if yielding to an irresistible impulse, bent down suddenly and touched his lips to the soft, cool palm.

"I hope to find you more cheerful when I come again," he said.

She bowed her head passively, making no other reply. But when he had gone out and shut the door, she sunk down on her knees, clasped both hands over her eyes, and burst out in subdued but hysterical crying.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE DECREE OF FATE.

The next day, at the hour he had himself appointed, Raymond Challoner slowly approached Lorn, threading one of those grass-grown paths that led, with many a *detour*, through the neglected grounds.

He was very pale, but his face wore a grim, resolute expression, and it was with a firm step the he ascended the terrace and made his way to the gloomy, forbidding-looking portal. He looked like a man with a fixed, inflexible purpose in his mind.

His foot had scarcely touched the topmost step when the door opened, noiselessly, and Joan appeared, her usually imperturbable face strangely agitated. She spoke no word of greeting, but in utter silence beckoned him to enter.

"And so I'm to be given the open sesame to this enchanted palace at last?" he said, with a mocking curl of the lip, as he crossed the threshold. "It is well."

"You would never enter with my consent," said Joan, fiercely. "But of course my mistress acts her own pleasure. I am powerless to keep you out."

Again Raymond smiled derisively.

"One would imagine you had played the part of ogre quite long enough. Beauty and the Beast and Una and the Lion are worn-out tales. They grow tiresome in process of time. No matter—I have gained my point. Pray conduct me at once to the presence of Mrs. Faunce."

The sneering emphasis with which he spoke that name sent a shudder through the woman's frame.

She suddenly grasped his arm.

"I can see that you are in no conciliatory mood," she said, dropping her voice to a whisper. "Be warned in time. My mistress is desperate already—do not drive her to madness. I make this plea for your sake as well as hers."

"Against what do you warn me?"

"Alas, I know not!" replied Joan, in deep agitation, dropping her hand and shrinking from him. "My heart misgives me—that's all. The shameful past has been rising before my mind with strange vividness all the morning."

He made an impatient gesture.

"How is your mistress?" he asked, after a short pause.

"Calm—unnaturally calm. I would rather see her in any other mood. Oh, it was not well to admit you to this interview. I begged and pleaded with her, but she would not listen. No good will come of it—no good!"

A low moan broke from her lips, but she seemed to recover herself after a moment, and pointing out to him a door lower down the passage, turned abruptly away, leaving him to go on by himself.

Raymond found Mrs. Faunce seated near an open window, in a partially darkened room. She was dressed in black—some soft, filmy goods that emphasized the livid pallor of her face. There were bluish shadows round her mouth and a purple line under her eyes that spoke of past conflict and suffering.

She sat with her cheek resting on her hand, but at the sound of the unclosing door she raised her head with a proud air that had something of defiance in it.

"You have come," she said, in a low monotonous voice. "I knew I could not evade you forever."

Raymond wondered at her calmness. She sat there like a marble woman, her glorious dark eyes meeting his unflinchingly. One fair, rounded arm was now thrown carelessly across a small table at her elbow, on which stood a silver salver and a slender Venetian glass filled with some dark-red liquid. She looked every inch a queen—a fallen one, perhaps—but wearing all her honors regally to the last.

"Olympia," he gasped, "is it really you, or a delusion of my own excited brain?"

"You knew, before coming here, whom you were to meet. Why, then, do you question me?" she said, wearily.

"It seems so strange, so impossible. I can almost believe that necromancy has been at work. I doubt my own convictions. I almost doubt the evidence of my senses."

Mrs. Faunce waved him to a seat.

"The long concealment and mystery are all over," she said. "It is too late even to speak of them. In one word, now that you have found me out, what do you intend to do?"

"My duty."

"Duty! That word does not sound very gracious, falling from your lips."

"Perhaps not; but I repeat it, all the same."

Her eyes fell, and for the first time she betrayed that, in spite of her forced composure, she was inwardly quivering with suspense and dread.

"What do you consider your duty?—if I may be so impudent as to inquire."

"First of all, to inform Colonel Falkner as to the true character of the siren to whose alluring wiles he has fallen the latest victim."

"It is unnecessary. Already Colonel Falkner has been made acquainted with the story of my past life."

"With your version of it, perhaps," came the sneering rejoinder. "It now remains for him to hear mine."

Mrs. Faunce looked as if she were shivering; the muscles about her mouth twitched convulsively.

"Once you pretended to love me," she said, in a muffled voice; "and now you are laying your plans to ruin me."

"My love was as short-lived as your own," Raymond answered. "It died in the birth-pangs of a great horror. A still fiercer passion seems to have sprung up, Phoenix-like, from the ashes of yours. We can neither of us approach the other."

Her proud head drooped a little, and she said abruptly:

"How long is it since you guessed my secret?"

"Strange suspicions have been working in my mind for some time. But the false name you bear, the fate I believed to have overtaken you, your singular whim of muffling your face, all helped to keep me in doubt."

"Yes—yes."

"Two days ago I found a volume of poems on Colonel Falkner's desk. Your name, 'Olympia,' was written on the fly-leaf. The volume was one I gave you, long ago. I knew Colonel Falkner had brought it from here. Of course conviction struck home to my mind in a moment. I knew for a certainty that there had been some trick about your reported death and burial."

Mrs. Faunce rose to her feet with a spasmodic effort, and moved several times up and down the length of the room. At length she paused before him, with her head cast down, as the guilty stand before their accusers.

"I do not deny your power and my helplessness," she said, "for you can, with a word, deprive me of the love of the only man I care to keep faithful to me. But I do ask you to spare me. It will cost you nothing to let me go my way in peace. My broken life is beautified with buds of promise that must soon burst into full flower unless crushed by your ruthless hand. Which will you choose to play—the part of my redeemer or that of my destroyer?"

Words and tone thrilled him strangely, but he said, with stern emphasis:

"You have an odd way of putting things, Olympia. I pity you from the depths of my soul. But of course, I cannot see a gentleman of Colonel Falkner's birth and position sacrifice himself to an adventuress without trying to turn him from his folly."

The biting accent in which he spoke told the woman that, little as he valued her love at the present time, he could not forgive her for having transferred it so readily to another. An unconfessed desire for revenge, quite as much as a sense of duty, was guiding him to the decision he had made.

"Can I say nothing to influence you differently?"

"Nothing."

"Is there not a single thought of mercy blended with the feeling of pity you profess to feel for me?"

"You must demand that at the hands of the man you love," said Raymond, slightly frowning. "I can but proclaim the truth."

"True. Forgive my persistency."

The ghost of a smile flickered over her bloodless lips; whether called there by the absurdity of the hope that he might be induced to spare, or by some other thought, it is impossible to say.

"I understand my fate, and accept it," she added, presently, in a changed voice. "Let us say no more. Stay! before we part you shall pledge me in a glass of wine. I poured it expressly for this occasion. Will you?"

There was an insane glitter in her eyes that frightened him. Half involuntarily, he stretched out his hand and lifted one of the glasses from the salver. She grasped the other, raised it to her lips, and drank off its contents. With his eyes fixed steadily on her face, he followed her example, draining its dregs the ruby liquid.

"It is the decree of fate," said the strange woman, in a hollow voice, as if speaking to herself. "Why should I repine or struggle?"

He saw her face turn deadly pale. Suddenly the frail glass slipped through her fingers and shivered in fragments at her feet.

"It is like my life," she muttered, looking down.

"Broken—shattered—destroyed!"

Raymond replaced his own glass on the salver, and, moved by a compassionate impulse, advanced to lead her to a seat. Waving him away with a shiver of disgust, she fell back suddenly, uttering a low cry, and put her handkerchief to her mouth. In an instant it was covered with blood, and the sluggish crimson was dripping on her black dress.

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "Your lungs are bleeding."

She shrunk from his proffered assistance even in this hour of extremity.

"Go," she hoarsely whispered. "You can do nothing. Leave the house!"

He dared not excite her further by remaining. Hurrying into the hall, where Joan still waited, he sent the faithful servant to the assistance of her mistress, and departed.

CHAPTER XXXV.

ACCOUNTS RENDERED.

An hour or two subsequent to that momentous interview between Raymond and Mrs. Faunce, Colonel Falkner was pacing the yellow sands of the shore about midway between Glenoaks and Lorn, when suddenly he heard his name screamed in shrill discordant accents from one of the heights above.

A thin, angular-looking woman, whom he recognized as Mrs. Bloom, the wife of one of the day-laborers employed on the estate, stood on the brow of the cliff, violently gesticulating, and muttering incoherent words. A thrill of dread surprise ran through him, for there was something very unusual in the action and he hastily climbed the steep ascent.

"What is the matter, my good woman?" he inquired, as he drew near.

"Lord bless you, sir!" she gasped, dropping her hand on his arm in great excitement, "it's a mercy you were led to walk this way. Come right along, sir! He is there, lying on my own bed, racked with pain, and screaming at the top of his voice for you to come."

So saying, she drew him forward with irresistible force, toward a small cottage that stood in a thicket a few rods further on. As they approached the door, the groans and cries of one in mortal anguish were borne distinctly to their ears.

"My good man has gone for Dr. Lance," whispered the woman, "and he will soon be here. I left my sister to watch with the poor fellow, and was on the way to Glenoaks when I saw you walking on the beach."

"Who is ill?"

"That fine gentleman guest of yours."

"You don't mean Mr. Challoner?" cried Colonel Falkner, in a startled voice.

"Yes, sir, that's the man! Tilda and I were sitting at our sewing, a wee bit ago, while my good man smoked his pipe in the corner, when the poor fellow stumbled in at the door, white as any sheet, and bent nearly double with pain. Oh, he did groan and take on awful, just at first! It took us all three to get him to the bed."

Waiting to hear no more, Colonel Falkner hurried into the cottage. Sure enough, there lay Raymond Challoner on a bed in one corner of the room, evidently very ill.

"My poor friend, what could have occasioned this sudden attack?" he said, bending over him. Raymond lay with his eyes half-shut, and his hands clutched convulsively at the bed-clothes. But, at the sound of that familiar voice, he looked up with a gasp of relief and pleasure.

"You are in time," he said. "Thank God."

"What can I do for you?"

"Nothing," replied the sick man, with a groan of despair. "I am past all help—I feel that I shall die. But I have something to say to you before it is too late."

He turned away his face, and two or three large tears rolled down his cheeks.

"Tell me how your illness came on, and I may be able to think of something to relieve you."

"No, I am doomed," said Raymond, in a sad whisper. "The death-pang has been rending my soul for some minutes. I have been poisoned."

"Poisoned!" echoed Colonel Falkner, in sharp, shrill accents, startled out of all self-control.

"Yes. That woman did it—that fiend in human shape. God raised her up to be my Nemesis, perhaps; if so she has fully accomplished her dreadful mission. I die, and she has been instrumental in causing my death."

"To whom do you refer?"

"Is it possible that you have not divined the truth? She is known here as Mrs. Faunce. When I first met her she bore the name of Olympia Verne. She may have owned half a dozen other *aliases*—"

A cry of bitter anguish arrested all further words. Colonel Falkner fell back suddenly in the chair Mrs. Bloom had placed for him, a cold dew breaking over his forehead and gemming his livid face.

"Let me go on briefly, for my time is short," resumed the dying man, after a pause. "Mrs. Faunce dreaded the effect of certain revelations I might make to you, and so determined to put me out of the way. Alas, alas! why did I venture into her presence again? I, who knew her so well of old, was a blind fool not to distrust every look, word and act of that infamous woman."

"You knew her—you knew Mrs. Faunce long ago?" said Colonel Falkner, in the lowest audible tone.

"Yes. I met her abroad—in Baden-Baden. She was a married woman then. Her husband, Captain Verne he called himself, was a professional gambler—Olympia hated him. Perhaps that is the one reason why she turned to me so readily. I won her confidence and then her love. She was forever bemoaning her hapless fate. Perhaps I am not altogether blameless for what happened afterward. Her husband was the only barrier between us, and—he died suddenly, under very suspicious circumstances."

Raymond was silent a moment or two, as if even the memory of that dreadful time overcame him. The pangs of physical suffering had also to be wrestled against. When he spoke again his voice had already lost in strength.

"I knew more than the rest of the world of the circumstances attending Captain Verne's death. They were such as not to leave a doubt in my mind of Olympia's guilt. My infatuation was changed suddenly into horror and loathing. We said farewell forever, and I never saw her again until after she came to Lorn. Until recently I fully believed that she had died, about a year later, in Southern

France, just in time to save herself from arrest and conviction; for Verne's friends had tardily bestirred themselves, and a rigid investigation was in progress. By what fraud that daring woman deluded even the authorities into the belief that she had died, I am unable to say."

Then briefly he went on to relate the circumstances that had led him to suspect Mrs. Faunce of being his lost love, Olympia Verne; and described what had taken place at their last fatal meeting.

"The wine she gave me to drink was poisoned," he said. "But I took it without a suspicion of the deadly purpose at that very moment working in her heart."

Colonel Falkner made no reply, but his face was as cold and white as that of the dying man.

"It is easy to understand why Olympia has kept herself so secluded and gone about in such a guise as to win for herself the sobriquet of the 'veiled lady of Lorn.' She wished to be near you without at the same time revealing herself to me."

Raymond ceased speaking, his head fell back, and for a time he stared straight forward into vacancy. But his hands were clinched.

"I want to say one word concerning Ethelind," he abruptly resumed. "Poor girl! The love I felt for her was the only pure thing in my life. I must tell you what induced her to give herself to me at last. I knew you suspected her of that mysterious attempt upon your own life—unjustly, I am sure—and told her that you did. In her horror and despair she was willing to consent to anything."

Another pause of labored breathing. The dying man was failing fast.

"I feel myself growing weaker every moment. I have kept the hardest confession to the last. Turn away your head or I shall not have the courage to make it. It was I who murdered my grandfather, Egbert Challoner! I was mad, desperate. The Jews were after me—they had oceans of my paper. If he had made a will disinheriting me, nothing could have saved me from exposure and ruin. With the cunning of a devil I dressed myself as much like Vincent Erle as possible, and when my poor grandfather woke up and saw me bending over him, he thought it was Dolores's husband. Madam Zoe alone divined the real truth. She looked in at the door just as the struggle ended and saw me. That is why she fled and hid herself, I suppose—because she would not betray me."

He paused from exhaustion. And at this moment the man Bloom arrived with Dr. Lance. The latter stepped quickly to the bedside, but he shook his head the instant he glanced into the sick man's face. The signet of death was already there.

"I can do nothing," he said, in a low voice. "God has taken the case into His own hands."

Colonel Falkner roused himself at these words. With his own hand he drew up a statement of the circumstances attending the murder of Egbert Challoner, and Raymond was enabled to sign it before he breathed his last. The names of Dr. Lance, and Bloom and his wife, were appended as witnesses.

When all was over he wrote a brief note to Mrs. Faunce. It ran thus:

"Another victim has fallen through your instrumentality, but he lived long enough to expose you. Farewell forever. I shall never again allow myself to become the dupe of one so utterly devoid of the divine attributes of justice and mercy."

The man Bloom took this note to Lorn; but returned without an answer. None was expected, or would have been received.

Several hours later, in the dull gray of twilight, Colonel Falkner was slowly pacing up and down the narrow strip of lawn before the cottage door, when a dark figure emerged from the shrubbery and Joan Withers stood before him.

"My mistress has sent for you," she said, in a husky voice. "You must come at once."

"Never!" he exclaimed. "It is better that I should not see her face again."

She broke out crying hysterically.

"It is too late to cherish resentment now. My poor lady is dying."

"Dying! Is this true?"

"Yes," she replied, "it is true. A second hemorrhage has come on, and she is bleeding internally and is sinking fast. You must hasten if you would see her alive. Do come, sir."

Colonel Falkner followed her without another word. Mrs. Faunce looked up, faintly smiled, and held out her trembling hand when Joan ushered him into the chamber where she lay.

"Thank you for coming," she whispered. "Now I can die in peace."

Colonel Falkner's stern face relaxed. Deeply as this woman had sinned, he could not forget that she had once been the central object of all his brightest dreams.

"This is very sudden," he said, a melancholy quiver in his voice.

"The exciting scenes of to-day hastened the end. Though I would never acknowledge it, even to myself, my doom was sealed months ago. The seeds of consumption have long been germinating in my veins. Their work was sure but secret, and now the end comes unexpectedly. Alas for our beautiful dreams of a happy life together! They could never, never have been realized!"

A sob rose with the last words, and for some moments she kept her face hidden in her hands.

"I have no time for confessions," she said at length, in a voice that was scarcely audible from intense repressed emotion. "Let me say what I wish to say in the fewest words possible. I did poison

Raymond Challoner! He stood in my way, he would have sown the seeds of a still greater distrust between us, and I hated him. But do not think worse of me than I deserve. I ran an equal chance with himself. There were two glasses on the salver, and death lurked in only one of them. Raymond chose for himself. Had he taken the other it was my settled purpose to drain the poisoned draught myself. It seemed necessary that one of us should die, and I left the choice to chance. Fate decreed that Raymond should be the victim."

"God forgive you!" gasped Colonel Falkner, wiping the cold beads of perspiration off his forehead.

"Ah, you do not know how I have dreaded and disliked that man! But for him I might have ventured to come to you openly, months ago, instead of burrowing here for pain and disappointment to eat my heart out. But I knew he would declare himself my enemy the moment he surmised the truth. Once before I tried to rid myself of him, but the result of that attempt was so awful that I scarcely dared repeat it."

"Once before?"

"Yes. It was some weeks ago—do you not remember the occasion? It was *you* who received the wound intended for *his* cowardly heart! Oh, heaven be praised that it did not prove a fatal one!"

Colonel Falkner drew back, staring at her aghast with horror and repulsion. Some seconds elapsed before he could recover himself sufficiently to speak.

"How blind I have been," he thought. "And, oh, how bitterly my suspicions wronged poor Ethelind!"

Aloud he said, after a still longer pause:

"Do you mean to tell me that it was *you* who stole into my chamber on that fatal night?"

"I do. I knew it was the room in which Raymond usually slept. I did not dream that *you* had exchanged rooms with him. But—I—I cannot speak of it. It nearly drove me mad when I knew I had injured you."

"You wore a white crape shawl!" said Colonel Falkner, in a deep, shaken voice.

A change went over her face; she began to tremble.

"Yes. Let me tell you all about it. Before entering your chamber that night I crept through the open window into a small ante-room to reconnoiter. Lying on the floor in the corridor I found a white crape shawl, dripping with rain. I knew it belonged to Ethelind Erle—I had seen her wear it on several occasions. I felt not a little jealous of the girl's influence upon yourself, and all at once the thought came to me that the tide of suspicion might be turned against her by making use of her shawl; for everybody knew how desirous she was of breaking the galling chains that bound her to Raymond. I acted upon the impulse of the moment. It was *my* shawl that was found with a fragment of the cloth torn away. They were precisely alike, and I believed that one could not be distinguished from the other. I brought Ethelind's away when I returned. But for the care you took to shield her, she must have been irreparably disgraced. You perceive that I know all about it."

Another painful silence ensued. Colonel Falkner could not wholly conceal the feeling of loathing this confession inspired. He abruptly changed the subject.

"One thing you have never explained fully, Olympia, and I have shrunk from broaching the subject before. How did you succeed in deluding the world—myself along with the rest—into the conviction of your sudden death?"

"That was not difficult," she answered. "For tune seemed to favor me. I had a twin-sister, Eliza, who came to my lodgings to die at the very time when exposure and disgrace were most imminent. She arrived in the night-time, and only two trusty servants knew of her being in the house. We were marvelously alike. You conjecture the rest. Eliza died, and was buried under my name, while I secretly fled the country and found a temporary refuge in a secluded village in England."

In a voice that now trembled with weakness she went on to speak of the deep, heart-sick longing that had finally tempted her to cross the seas and be near him, where she could occasionally hear the sound of his voice, though herself unseen and unsuspected.

"I felt that I could venture to reveal myself at last," she said, "when time had wrought its softening influences on your heart. If your love was like mine, it could forgive much and still endure. I sent for Joan Withers, a faithful servant, who had nursed me when a child, and we came here together. Of course it was necessary to take another name than my own, and I chose that of Faunce. It was my mother's maiden name."

Little more was said. She seemed to be growing weaker every moment. A strange, icy coldness gradually crept over that lovely face, and the fluttering pulse grew perceptibly fainter. At last she raised her eyes to his and said, faintly gasping:

"Let me die on your bosom, Philip. It will be easier to go with your arms folded round me."

He raised her up, and pillow'd her head on his breast. Just when the final moment came he never knew. She lay with her head slightly averted, motionless as a child who slumbers peacefully. The moments wore on and he dared not stir for fear of disturbing her.

At length Joan came softly into the room. She stole quickly to the side of her mistress, and touched one of her listless hands. The wild wail of sorrow that broke from the woman's lips was the first intimation Colonel Falkner had that what he clasped to his bosom was but senseless clay.

CHAPTER XXXVI.
FROM NIGHT TO LIGHT.

THE day subsequent to that on which the events of tragic interest we have just related transpired, Vincent and Dolores were sitting dejected in the prison cell when the door was abruptly opened, and a veiled figure, dressed in deep black, was ushered in. A passionate exclamation burst from Vincent's lips, and he opened his arms.

"Ethelind, dear sister, is it you?"

She sprang into his embrace, leaned her head on his shoulder, and sobbed aloud. In a moment Dolores was beside them, the arms of the three intertwined, and their tears flowed together. To each heart that reunion brought a singular blending of pain and pleasure.

"My poor brother," said Ethelind. "It has looked as if I had deserted you. But I have been praying for you. Never, never doubt that, dear Vincent."

"Why did you go away?"

A slight shudder passed through her as she answered:

"I would rather not talk of that. It does not matter now why I went. It more deeply concerns you to know what induced me to return."

Vincent started and gathered up his breath, for her words were full of meaning.

"You have news for me!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. I have seen Madam Zoe. She knows all about the murder, I feel assured. If we can find her again, her testimony will be sufficient to clear you."

The young man was silent; but a sob broke from the lips of Dolores.

"Thank the Lord!" she ejaculated. "He has heard my prayers at last. I knew He would never be so unjust as to make you suffer for the crime of another."

In the midst of the agitation and excitement that prevailed, the key once again turned in the lock, and this time it was Colonel Falkner who advanced with a slow step into the cell. He looked jaded and worn, and his clothing was spattered with mud, as if he had ridden fast and far.

"Ethelind! you here!" were the first words he uttered, as his startled gaze rested on the figure of the young girl.

She shrunk against the wall, pale as death, and trembling with excitement. But he followed her, clasped her reluctant hand, and said, in accents of great tenderness:

"Poor child! It seems like a mistaken step for you to leave us. At first I felt like blaming you severely. But that is all over. Now I thank God, from the depths of my heart, that you did go."

"I shall never return to Glenoaks," she said, in a faint voice. "You must not ask or expect it. I came here to do my brother a service; when it is accomplished you must suffer me to go my way in peace."

"Fear nothing, child. He whom you dread to meet will never trouble you again. Raymond is dead!"

"Dead!" gasped Ethelind, looking at him with dilated eyes.

"Yes. Sit down and try to be calm. It is a long story I have to tell. There is much in it that is both startling and surprising. It is well that you are here and can learn its details at the same time with your brother."

Vincent and Dolores seated themselves on the side of the cot, leaving the two rude chairs with which the cell was furnished for Ethelind and Colonel Falkner. When all were seated, the latter went on, in a low, feeling voice, to relate all that had occurred, sparing neither himself nor others in the simple but truthful recital.

Long before his story ended, Dolores had fallen on the neck of her husband, and with tears and sobs was thanking God for the deliverance He had wrought. Vincent could go out into the world again, without even the stigma of guilt clinging to his name.

When at last Colonel Falkner ventured to look at Ethelind, she sat leaning slightly forward, her lovely face hidden in her hands. Drawing his chair close to hers he said, in a whisper:

"God has been at work for us, dear Ethelind. The wicked are confounded in their evil ways. It is always safe to leave results with him."

A low murmur fell from her lips, and he knew that she was praying. After a long silence she raised her head and spoke:

"You must have loved that woman idolatrously, Colonel Falkner."

A shadow passed over his face.

"She infatuated me—my senses were caught by her marvelous beauty. I feel like one waking out of a dream that might have ended in death. I tremble, and my soul is sick. But I am no longer under the spell, thank God. Even if Olympia had lived, she and I must have remained strangers to the end of time. Henceforth let hers be a forbidden name between us."

After a brief silence he added:

"My first duty is to get down on my knees and beseech your forgiveness for the wrong I did you in my secret thoughts. Circumstantial evidence was against you, or I might never have been so deceived. Of course I allude to that dreadful night when the attempt was made upon my life."

"I have suffered," she said in a trembling voice. "But the past is over and done with, and cannot be recalled. It is enough that you now exonerate me."

Her working features betrayed such signs of mental suffering that he hastened to change the subject.

"How pale and thin you are, Ethelind. Have you been ill?"

"Very ill," she answered. "But I found faithful

friends who never forsook me in my time of trouble. To them I owe more than I can ever repay."

She briefly related what had befallen her since the night of her flight from Glenoaks. Of Matthew Pufy and his daughter Emily she spoke in terms of grateful praise.

"They are worthy people, and I feel like doing something to help them," she said. "I have decided to purchase a neat little cottage in the suburbs of New York, and give it to Em'ly—that is, if you, my guardian do not object to such a use being made of my money."

"Do as you think best, Ethelind."

Colonel Falkner was greatly surprised to learn that Madam Zoe had found temporary shelter under the same roof to which Providence seemed to have directed Ethelind's own steps.

"There is more in that woman's history than has ever been revealed to us," he said, thoughtfully. "We have not seen the last of her."

The result proved that he had reasoned well. Late that day the body of Raymond Challoner was brought to Dingle Dell that it might be buried from the home of his ancestors; and the next morning Aunt Jerry came to Colonel Falkner, as he paced slowly up and down one of the garden paths, looking startled and frightened.

"Do come in—quick!" she gasped. "Madam Zoe is in the library with the—the body. And she does take on dreadfully!"

He hurried back to the house. The violence of Madam Zoe's grief seemed to have spent itself before he entered, for she stood behind the coffin very pale and still save the nervous tremors that shook her from head to foot.

Going up to her he laid his hand firmly on her shoulder.

"Why are you here?" he said, in a stern though not unkind tone. "What relation did you bear to the dead?"

She looked at him sullenly, but made no answer.

"You had better tell me. It is of no use trying to keep your secret longer."

"I was his mother."

"His mother!"

"Yes. You needn't look at me so—I'm telling you the truth. Ah, how I loved him!"

She turned away for a moment, a subdued wail breaking from her lips.

"His father was quite fond of me at one time," she went on, rapidly, in a sobbing voice. "But the blood of a subject race is in my veins, and he refused to make me his wife. I am a quadroon."

"Poor woman!"

"I don't need your pity. It is too late for it to help me."

"Why did you go away?"

"I won't tell you."

"No matter. I am able to conjecture the truth. You witnessed the murder, and fled to be spared the horror of witnessing against your own son—God help you!"

She dropped her head with a bitter moan, but the expression of her face told him that he had read her motives aright.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

L'ENVOI.

THE story is told, and the time has come for us to part from these friends who, for a brief period, have seemed near and almost as dear as those of our own household. We leave them with regret, but thank God, with the conviction that permanent peace has come to brood over their tried and troubled lives.

We see Vincent and Dolores comfortably settled at Dingle Dell, happy in each other, and their lives better, nobler and brighter, no doubt, for the terrible cloud that once overshadowed them.

Aunt Jerry Martin remains with them, and the lonely old woman's heart has already found solace in the bright-eyed baby-boy, the perfect image of his mother, whom he alternately scolds and pets.

Madam Zoe has taken up her old round of duties. But she has grown old and feeble beyond her years, and will never again be the same cheerful woman she was before the occurrences of that fatal night.

One beautiful June day, when the storms and sunshine of nearly a twelvemonth had alternately beaten upon or brightened the graves of the departed, Colonel Falkner stole into the parlor at Glenoaks, where Ethelind was sitting before the open piano, listlessly trifling with the keys.

He was unexpected. He had been away for many weeks, on some mission to the West, and no message had been sent in advance to herald his coming. But Ethelind's thoughts were all of him, and the dreary look of pain and longing in her beautiful eyes were enough to touch any heart to pity.

At the sound of his step she started and turned round quickly. She could not speak, but hot blushes suffused her face, and she stood up trembling.

"I have come back, Ethelind," he said, in a low, tender voice, extending both his hands. "Where are your words of welcome?"

A smothered sob broke from her lips, but she still stood mute and motionless.

"This absence has revealed to me my own heart," he went on. "I know now in precisely what estimation I hold you. Oh, darling, your face has been before me constantly, whether I waked or dreamed, the day-star of my existence. I can never leave you again. Speak to me, love; tell me there is no need."

Lower and lower drooped her head until that flushed, beautiful face was hidden on his bosom. For once silence was far more eloquent than speech.

"This later love is the only pure, honest love of my life," Colonel Falkner murmured, in the deep

tones that always thrilled her heart. "Ah, you little know how tenderly I shall cherish you!"

Two hours later he led her into the adjoining room, where Mrs. Falkner sat alone in the gathering twilight.

"Mother, I crave a warmer greeting than usual," he said, "for I have brought not only myself but a daughter, who claims her own share of your affections."

Not another word of explanation was needed. Mrs. Falkner stretched forth her hands and said, with tears of happiness trembling in her eyes:

"God bless you, my children."

THE END.

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CHAPTER I.

A FATEFUL MEETING.

The Columbia on her evening trip cityward from Coney Island was not so crowded as usual

with her gay burden of human freight, for the August day had been cool, cloudy, and delightful even in New York city.

Among the excursionists was a party of young girls comprising half of the force of salesladies employed in the great fancy goods house of Vellingham Brothers, Broadway, on the annual trip to the sea-shore given them by their employers.

They were for the most part, gay, happy young people to whom the charming excitement of the trip was as rare as enjoyable—

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